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WILLIAM CUNNINGHAM
His Life, Thought, and Controversies

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ABSTRACT

The central thesis of this work is that Cunningham's life and work must be understood in terms of his struggle to defend and promote the principles of the Reformation in response to numerous challenges from Church and State. Cunningham's responses to these challenges are presented in a biographical study, chronologically examining his life, thought and controversies. This biography presents a theological history of his life, incorporating social and political history only where needed for contextual purposes.

An examination of letters, pamphlets, contemporary periodicals and newspapers reveals a far more nuanced portrait of William Cunningham than previously acknowledged and one that recognizes to a greater extent the significant contributions of this nineteenth-century minister, Churchman, Professor, and Principal. His was a life of controversy, as he attempted to recover the theology of the Reformers and to advance the mission of evangelicalism.

In chapter one, Cunningham, as a student, transitions within the Church of Scotland from Moderatism to Evangelicalism, and wages his first major controversy, fighting to improve the Edinburgh Divinity library. In chapter two, Cunningham, as a minister in Greenock, confronts the Rowites, then challenging the Westminster Confession of Faith. In chapter three, Cunningham battles Scottish Dissenters, Moderates, and the State over the nature of the Church, during the Ten Years' Conflict. In chapter four, Cunningham fights to establish the Free Church of Scotland, but his efforts to strengthen ties with evangelicals throughout Christendom brings opposition from abolitionists, other denominations, and Free Church ministers. In chapter five, Cunningham opposes Roman Catholicism and efforts within his denomination to build additional theological colleges. In chapter six, Cunningham enjoys a respite from controversy, concentrating on New College and contributing articles defending the Reformers and their theology.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN REFERENCES

<i>BDES</i>	<i>Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsman</i> , ed. by T. Thomson (London, 1875).
<i>DSCHT</i>	<i>Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology</i> , ed. by N.M. de S. Cameron, D.F. Wright, D.C. Lachman, and D.E. Meek (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996).
<i>Disruption Worthies</i>	<i>Disruption Worthies, A Memorial of 1843</i> , ed. by J.B. Gillies, with hist. intro. by J.A. Wylie (Edinburgh, 1881).
EUL	Edinburgh University Library
NCL	New College Library, Edinburgh University
NLS	National Library of Scotland
<i>NDT</i>	<i>New Dictionary of Theology</i> , ed. by S.B. Ferguson, D.F. Wright, and J.I. Packer (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1988).
<i>RSCHS</i>	<i>Records of the Scottish Church History Society</i>
SRO	Scottish Record Office
<i>SHR</i>	<i>Scottish Historical Review</i>

INTRODUCTION

I

According to "oral tradition," William Cunningham visited his friend and fellow Free Church minister, Charles Brown, in hospital one day. Brown, though brilliant, occasionally suffered bouts of mental illness. On this particular day, Brown was in a state of delirium, believing that he was already in heaven. When Cunningham entered the ward in which Brown was residing, Brown looked up, startled by Cunningham's presence, and greeted him with the words, "I did not expect to find you here."¹ Judging by the way Cunningham's critics have described him leaves the impression that some of them do not expect to find Cunningham in heaven either. He is often remembered today as he was caricaturized by the political satirists of his day--bellicose, bigoted, and bullying. One cartoon, depicting the day of the Disruption, pictures Cunningham walking beside his friend and fellow Churchman, Robert Candlish. "Ay, Candy," he says, "wait till we get to the Gas-work, and we'll blow up the Establishment!" Although these descriptions of Cunningham pick up on a very real flaw in his character, one Cunningham readily admitted to having, they fail to present a balanced portrait of the man.

Other depictions of Cunningham have tended to minimize his weaknesses and reduce the significance of some of his controversies. The only existing biography, written by James MacKenzie and Robert Rainy, for example, devotes only one page to the "Send Back the Money Campaign" and states that differences of opinion over this agitation were "discussed calmly" within the Free Church of Scotland.² This affair, raised by abolitionists

¹W. S. Anderson, former College Curator and Office Caretaker for the Free Church of Scotland College and Offices, gave me this account, which had been told to him by G.N.M. Collins, former Professor of Church History at the Free Church College.

²J. MacKenzie and R. Rainy, *Life of William Cunningham, D.D.* (London, 1871) 21.

attempting to embarrass the Free Church into returning money donated to them by American Churches with slaveholding members, was primarily directed at Cunningham. For several years, this very public controversy brought him unwarranted and undesirable attention and resulted in significant discord within the fledgling Church. A review of MacKenzie's and Rainy's biography for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* also understated the negative effects of Cunningham's debates. In his article, James MacGregor, one of Cunningham's former students, notes that Cunningham was "profoundly mistaken" in his notion that he had fallen out of favor with many in the Free Church over the "College Controversy."³ This debate, over the number of theological halls to be established and maintained by the Free Church, lasted nearly a decade and pitted Cunningham against close friends and colleagues. In the end, Cunningham lost not only his goal of having one college, but also, for a time at least, the affection of many in the Church. MacKenzie, Rainy, and MacGregor were all overly positive in their characterizations of Cunningham, but understandably so. MacKenzie was a friend, MacGregor a former student, and Rainy a student and later pastor to Cunningham. And each was sensitive to the need to portray the still young Free Church and her leaders in a positive light. As MacGregor noted in his review of the biography, "Rainy has admirably succeeded in conserving for the Church the lessons derivable from the later part of Cunningham's life, without, so far as we can see, doing anything tending to produce any of those evil consequences which might have been apprehended from a really full account of it."⁴

II

The central thesis of this work is that Cunningham's life and work must be understood in

³J. MacGregor, "Dr William Cunningham," *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, xx (1871) 774.

⁴*ibid.*, 792.

terms of his struggle to defend and promote the principles of the Reformation in response to numerous challenges from Church and State. Cunningham's responses to these challenges are presented in a biographical study, chronologically examining his life, controversies, and written works. This biography presents a theological history of his life, incorporating social and political history only where needed for contextual purposes. In the first chapter, Cunningham's transition in the Church of Scotland from Moderate to Evangelical is chronicled. The significance for Cunningham is the resolute stand that he began to take against any perceived deviation from a conversion-oriented gospel, based on the doctrines he believed were rediscovered at the time of the Reformation. This placed him in theory, and later in practice, in violent opposition to Moderates, whose principles he viewed as devised by men "who had not the fear of God before their eyes, and who knew nothing from their own experience of the converting and sanctifying power of Christian truth."⁵

In the second chapter, Cunningham's opposition shifts from Moderates to men like Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, John Macleod Campbell, Edward Irving, and Alexander John Scott, each of whom Cunningham believed to be confusing the truths of the gospel and challenging Reformation doctrine as developed and codified in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Moving to Greenock at the time when these ministers and theologians were vocally advocating their views, Cunningham's years there became a defining moment for him as he concluded that the gospel of the "Campbellites," as he called them, was a different gospel from that of the Apostle Paul, and that therefore its advocates were heretics.

In the third chapter, Cunningham finds himself arguing first, against Scottish Dissenters who became known as Voluntaries, that the notion of an established Church is consistent with the principles of the Reformation and of the Westminster Confession; and second, against Moderates in the Church of Scotland, that the notion

⁵W. Cunningham to Anderson, 26 October 1829 (NLS, MS 10997, fols. 110-11).

of an established Church does not permit civil interference in the affairs of the Church. During this time, later named the Ten Years' Conflict, Cunningham became well versed in the history of the Continental and Scottish Reformations, helping to recover the "two kingdoms" teaching of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He also exercised a significant influence on the culmination of what some have called a third Reformation. What had begun with the revival of the Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, reached a climax in May 1843, when over a third of the ministers and as many as half of the lay members left the established Church to form the Free Church of Scotland.

In the fourth chapter, Cunningham participates in the Disruption and the founding of the new denomination. His rise to prominence during the Ten Years' Conflict, due primarily to his ability in debate and his mastery of Church history since the Reformation, leads to Cunningham's appointment as a junior professor in the denomination's New College. His initial years as a Churchman in the Free Church, however, are filled with controversy as he seeks closer ties with other free, evangelical denominations. Putting into practice the evangelical notion that Christians are united through conversion, regardless of denomination, Cunningham unwittingly provokes hostility in America when he travels there to raise awareness of and support for the Free Church. His first major controversy since the Disruption, the "Send Back the Money Campaign," is the result. And his efforts to unite evangelicals through the Evangelical Alliance cause further disagreement within the Free Church itself as Cunningham seems to some to be advocating union with Voluntaries.

In the fifth chapter, Cunningham wages his favorite and least favorite battles, both for the sake of Protestantism. First, against a newly confident Roman Catholicism, bolstered in part by increasing political tolerance and support, Cunningham evidences a masterful knowledge of the history of the Protestant-Catholic debate and a "heart hatred" for what he believed were Catholicism's perversions of the gospel. Second,

against those in the Free Church who sought to erect more than one theological college to train ministerial candidates, Cunningham wages an intensely personal and increasingly angry battle to establish one superior institution. The perfecting of one college was in Cunningham's mind absolutely essential to effectively prepare ministers to thwart the advances of Catholicism and to further the cause of the Reformation.

Finally, in the sixth chapter, Cunningham enjoys a respite from controversy as he retreats from the public life of the Church, spending his last years concentrating on New College and defending the Reformers and their doctrines through articles written for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*. These articles, as do two of his other works (*Historical Theology* and *Church Principles*) reflect his mature theology, honed during major conflicts in the life of the Church of Scotland and later in the Free Church of Scotland.

III

Cunningham, to a large extent, has been forgotten today, though he was an extremely important figure in nineteenth-century evangelicalism, especially in the Reformed world. It was held by some, for instance, that he and Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary were the two greatest theologians of their day. Others were somewhat less ambitious in their estimation, but nevertheless called him one of the greatest theologians of Scotland, if not the greatest. Even his critics were quick to point out his extraordinary capabilities in the area of historical theology. Cunningham was in his time an internationally respected Churchman and theologian, and a central figure in the founding of the Free Church of Scotland. It is arguable, in fact, that there would have been no Disruption apart from Cunningham's resolute determination not to compromise the spiritual independence of the Church. The Disruption may have required the charismatic personality of Thomas Chalmers, but Cunningham's

uncompromising stance at several key junctures during the Ten Years' Conflict ensured its inevitability. In spite of these assessments, there is very little modern interaction with his writings; no modern biography has been published. This may be due in part to Cunningham's decided conviction that systematic theology reached its high point in the seventeenth century with the formulation of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the theologies of scholastic Calvinist theologians, especially Francis Turretin and Herman Witsius. Another contributing factor may be his disdain for writing, reflected in what has been deemed his magnum opus, *Historical Theology*. Although his mind was full of historical detail, this two-volume work, based on his lecture notes, is somewhat austere in its treatment. Our modern era may offer a third possibility. Postmodernity, with its inherent intolerance for dogmatism, has little time for someone like Cunningham, who was admittedly black and white on many issues.

Cunningham, though somewhat forgotten, is still respected in many Reformed circles. His works are still studied in seminaries and his thought still used to support various positions of Reformed theologians and ministers. Donald Macleod, Professor of Systematic Theology at the Free Church College, Edinburgh, has written several insightful articles on Cunningham and relies extensively on his works in his classroom lectures. Two recent publications by T & T Clark, *Studies in Scottish Church History*, by the historian A.C. Cheyne, and *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846 - 1996*, edited by the historical theologian, D.F. Wright, and the systematic theologian, G.D. Badcock, have recognized Cunningham's contribution to the ethos of New College and the Free Church of Scotland. The historical theologian, Joel Beeke, has recently contributed an article on Cunningham's historical methodology to the book, *Historians of the Christian Tradition*. On a more popular level, the American preacher, John MacArthur, has quoted extensively from Cunningham's works in his own writings. Additionally, Cunningham's works are still

in print, preserved by publishers such as The Banner of Truth Trust and Still Waters Revival Books. Like the Wodrow Society, which Cunningham helped to found, these publishing houses reprint older, forgotten writings, which they believe can still make a significant contribution to the Church. Finally, some of Cunningham's opinions still carry enough force that scholars holding differing opinions feel the need to refute his arguments. The pastor and historian, A.C. Clifford, for instance, in *Atonement and Justification*, criticizes at numerous points Cunningham's view of the atonement.

IV

There is no major collection of Cunningham manuscripts, but letters to, from, and about Cunningham are still extant in other collections. These include the Bonar Letters at the National Library of Scotland, the Chalmers Papers at New College Library, Edinburgh, and the Hodge Letters at Princeton University. New College Library also houses one of the best collections of nineteenth-century pamphlets, many of which were written about Cunningham or were responses to something he had written or spoken. A large number of these pamphlets were evidently not consulted for Rainy's biography. Periodicals, such as *Church Review*, *The Presbyterian Magazine*, *Presbyterian Review*, and the *Free Church Magazine* included articles written by Cunningham and reported on his numerous speeches. In addition, *Witness* was a significant source for Cunningham's speeches, some of which were reported verbatim. These and many other sources reveal to a greater extent than has previously been acknowledged the contribution Cunningham made in defending and reviving the principles of the Reformation. He is a figure worth recovering.

AN EVANGELICAL IS BORN (1805-1829)

"I have made trial of all the Moderate clergy in Edinburgh, and from not one of them could I learn what must a man do to be saved."

I

Bounded to the east and north by the River Clyde, approximately ten miles southeast of Glasgow, stands the parish of Hamilton, Lanarkshire. Unexceptional according to *The Statistical Account of Scotland 1791-1799*, most men engaged in farming or manufacturing, the most common beverage was a "lively" malt liquor, and most churchgoers attended one of several Presbyterian churches.¹ John Naismith reported for the *Statistical Account* that in 1791 there were only three Anabaptists out of a population of 5017; all others worshipped at the Church of Scotland or denominations with Presbyterian roots: 874 worshipped at the Relief Church (the Second Secession, in 1761, from the Church of Scotland); 250 worshipped as Anti-Burghers (a split in 1747 of the First Secession of 1733 from the Church of Scotland); sixty worshipped as part of the Macmillan Sect, who reportedly professed "an adherence to the pure tenets of the Presbyterian reformed religion, as established in Scotland in the time of Charles I;" and fifty worshipped as Old Scots Independents (founded by two former Church of Scotland ministers).² Though Naismith's narrative of Hamilton revealed a fairly commonplace town, it did cite one peculiar enthusiasm:

The young men of this parish have always shown a great ardour for a military life. A popular recruiting officer never comes to the place, in time of war, without making great levies. In the year 1778, above sixty enlisted in the regiment raised by the Duke of Hamilton, besides some who entered with other corps. The women have shown little less eagerness to follow the camp,³ a good many always going off, with every party of the military, who have been quartered here.

¹J. Naismith, "Parish of Hamilton," *The Statistical Account of Scotland*, ed. by Sir John Sinclair (21 vols., Edinburgh, 1791-9), vii. 378-88, 392-5.

²*ibid.*, 390, 397-8.

³*ibid.*, 396.

In this parish of Hamilton, William Cunningham was born to Charles and Helen Cunningham on 2 October 1805. The first of three sons, he was followed by brothers Andrew and Charles. Little is known about his parents' ancestry except that his mother was descended from the brother of the covenanter, Alexander Peden.⁴ His father, Charles Cunningham, was a merchant dealing in drapery and hardware goods in Castle Wynd, Hamilton.⁵

Young William Cunningham's life in Hamilton suffered a grievous blow on 31 December 1810. On that day the Cunningham family journeyed to the nearby parish of Lesmahagow (about eleven miles southeast of Hamilton) to spend New Year's Day with Helen's father. The mother and her three little boys traveled in a light covered cart, while the father rode on horseback. As the cart rattled past a field, a large number of crows, frightened by the noise of the cart, took to flight, startling the horse Charles Cunningham rode. He fell to the ground, but rose, seemingly unharmed, and went on with the journey. Within a short time, however, he died, having suffered a fatal internal injury. William, the oldest of Charles's three children, was only five years old.⁶

For several years after Charles Cunningham's death, the Cunninghams remained in Hamilton, and William began school there at the age of five. When he started his education at the parish school of Hamilton, William demonstrated an early propensity for learning. If missed at home, he could usually be found alone at school engrossed in a book. On one occasion at school he so impressed the visiting magistrates in a public exhibition that his classmates carried him shoulder high through the streets of Hamilton in recognition of his intellectual achievement.⁷

Charles Cunningham had left the family with the modest income of 100 pounds

⁴R. Rainy and J. Mackenzie, *Life of William Cunningham, D.D.* (London, 1871), 19.

⁵"Cunningham, Rev. William, D.D., LL.D.," *Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (London, 1875), 418.

⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 2.

⁷*ibid.*, 10-11.

per year, and Helen Cunningham was forced to look elsewhere for family support. A few years after the death of her husband, she moved the family from Hamilton to Lesmahagow, Lanarkshire, to live with her father, the tenant of Draffane Farm. In Lesmahagow, William continued his education under a discharged Peninsular soldier who had opened a school for the younger children of the neighborhood. The school did little to further William's mental development. The best aspects of the school, at least for William, were the teacher's numerous battle stories and the frequent unexpected holidays due to the teacher's drunkenness.⁸ In 1814, Helen Cunningham's father died, leaving the lease of the farm to her brother, Andrew, who allowed Helen and her children to remain on Draffane Farm. In 1815, when William reached the age of ten, the Cunningham boys walked two miles to the parish school, forsaking the soldier's tales of bravado for the more reasonable tutelage of Robert Burns Begg, nephew of Robert Burns, the poet. At this school, according to his teacher, William distinguished himself as an insatiable reader, who especially liked to read stories of battles. Helen picked up on William's interest in battles and convinced him that the Bible contained more battles than any other book, with the result that William immediately took up the Bible and read it from cover to cover, from Abraham's defeat of Kedorlaomer to the battle of Armageddon.⁹

One year after Andrew took over the lease of Draffane Farm he also died, leaving the lease to George Cunningham, Helen's brother and parish minister of Duns, Berwickshire. Having no interest in the farm, he disposed of the lease to the landlord, the Duke of Hamilton. Soon afterwards Helen took her family to Hamilton and shortly thereafter to Cheeklaw, a farm near Duns, to be near her brother and other family members living there.¹⁰ Duns, located in the eastern borders of Scotland, about fifteen miles west of Berwick upon Tweed, had a special school established to

⁸ibid., 13-14.

⁹ibid., 13.

¹⁰Helen Cunningham had a sister there who was married to her cousin, William Cunningham, a banker and writer. *ibid.*, 15.

prepare boys for university. Cunningham later stated that he received the best part of his education at Duns Academy. Thomas Maule, the master, and an expert in classics, recognized in Cunningham a “lover of impartial justice and fair play” and a brilliant scholar. His “extensive acquaintance with the classics of Greece and Rome,” he stated, “astonished the examiners” at the annual examination of 1819.¹¹ In subsequent years Cunningham’s performance set the standard for the other students, and the comment was often made that “while the pupils had acquitted themselves well, there was no Willie Cunningham among them.”¹²

At the age of thirteen, William took over the leading of family worship from his mother. Taking the Bible from her hand one evening he read a chapter and knelt down and prayed, a habit he performed daily until he left his mother’s home two years later. A close friend later described it this way: “...though then he knew not God at all, yet, anxious to ease her of any burden, and win her smile, William took his mother’s place in conducting family worship....”¹³ He made his choice of vocation soon afterwards, feeling a sense of constraint to become a minister.¹⁴

II

In November 1820, at the age of fifteen, William Cunningham entered the University of Edinburgh, intent on training for the ministry. Edinburgh held two advantages for Cunningham: its proximity to Duns (approximately thirty three miles northwest) and its outstanding reputation.¹⁵ The students of Scottish Universities did not reside within the walls of the College, but lived wherever they chose and seldom encountered their professors apart from classroom instruction.¹⁶ This was especially

¹¹ibid., 17.

¹²ibid.

¹³J.J. Bonar, “William Cunningham, D.D.,” *Disruption Worthies* (Edinburgh, 1881), 193-4.

¹⁴ibid., 19.

¹⁵T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830* (London: Fontana Press, 1985), 353.

¹⁶*Parliamentary Papers*, Report of the Commissioners Appointed for Enquiring into the State of the Universities and Colleges of Scotland (1831), 10.

true at Edinburgh University because of its size.¹⁷ Cunningham found lodging less than three fourths of a mile southeast of Old College at the northeast corner of St Patrick Square, just off Nicolson Street, where he resided for the four sessions of his Arts studies (Latin, Greek, mathematics, logic, and moral and natural philosophy).¹⁸

Studying in Edinburgh during the decade from 1820 to 1830 profoundly affected Cunningham. The whole of Scotland at that time was being affected by the Evangelical revival, with its emphasis on the transitory nature of society and the need for personal salvation. Many Scots had embraced a vital biblical Christianity and heartfelt piety. Large crowds filled Church halls to hear fashionable Evangelical preachers; family worship increased while swearing decreased; Bible studies and prayer groups multiplied; and young men and women filled their hours together with religious discussion and prayer.¹⁹

The Evangelical revival in Scotland was spurred on by a concurrent movement in literature and the arts. Romanticism, with emphasis upon imagination, sentiment, aspiration, and the importance of nature and history for human experience, provided a context in which Evangelicalism could prosper.²⁰ A reaction against the mechanism, neo-classicism, and rationalism of the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement's impact on Russia and Western Europe, begun during the late eighteenth century, intensified by the end of the century and indelibly marked the beginning of the nineteenth century.²¹ The movement in Scotland included the revival of Highland culture, of the kilt and the bagpipe, for example, and was dramatically exhibited in the

¹⁷*Commissioners*, 186. The total number of students attending classes at Edinburgh University (including 283 divinity students) during 1821 was 2,224. *Commissioners*, 161.

¹⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 20.

¹⁹S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 211.

²⁰D.W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), 81; Brown, *Chalmers*, 211.

²¹Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 81. Romanticism's impact is well documented in M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), L. Furst, *Romanticism in Perspective* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), and S. Prickett, *Romanticism and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

pageantry surrounding George IV's visit to Edinburgh in 1822.²² Sir Walter Scott, largely responsible for the ambience of the event, probably did more to advance the cult of the Romantic in Scotland than anyone else. By the time of his death in 1832 he would make Scotland famous in a new way as a place of romance in history, scenery, and character.²³

Scott's particular significance for Cunningham was the ardent support Scott gave John Wilson as candidate for Professor of Moral Philosophy of Edinburgh University. The previous professor, Thomas Brown, died in April, 1820, and due largely to Wilson's Tory loyalties and Scott's canvassing, Wilson gained the post over his Whig competitor, Sir William Hamilton.²⁴ Wilson was Romanticism personified. To his admirers, he was the *first man*, a being less sophisticated than Adam; he was the *noble savage*, exhibiting the primitive strength and fierce splendor of an untamed era.²⁵ Collaborating with John Gibson Lockhart and James Hogg as major contributors to *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, Wilson eventually became identified with Christopher North, the fictitious editor of the magazine and ultimately a glorified and idealized projection of his own personality.²⁶ Although his students affectionately called Wilson "the Professor," they admired him as the embodiment of Christopher North.²⁷ Rather than a systematic course of Moral Philosophy, Wilson gave his students an exotic concoction of poetry and philosophy in the romantic style of Christopher North.²⁸ Even Wilson's physical appearance added to his romantic mystique. His startling appearance (he typically raced across the college quadrangle

²²Brown, *Chalmers*, 211.

²³G.D. Henderson, *Heritage: A Study of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1943), 53.

²⁴William Wordsworth also gave Wilson support in his bid for the Professorship, though limited. E. Swann, *Christopher North* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1934), 136. Wilson had been a fan of Wordsworth since an early age. J. McCosh, *The Scottish Philosophy from Hutcheson to Hamilton* (London, 1875), 410.

²⁵Swann, *Christopher North*, 187.

²⁶*ibid.*, 110.

²⁷*ibid.*, 186.

²⁸*ibid.*, 194.

to his classroom in tattered gown, looking as though he had just risen from his bed, having slept in his clothes) cast its irresistible spell over the students.²⁹ Wilson never fully developed a systematic Moral Philosophy, and at the end of the day he wrote little profound philosophy, but his personality took his students' hearts and imaginations by storm.³⁰ According to Wilson's daughter, his students "may have before this read and argued about philosophy; they were now made to feel it as a power."³¹

Cunningham evidently came under the influence of "the Professor" and he enjoyed the novels of Scott, but was probably more profoundly influenced by the Romanticism that venerated the Scottish religious figures of the past, especially the Reformers and Covenanters.³² Two distinct strains of Romantic writing existed at this time regarding Scotland's Calvinist religious tradition.³³ The first strain, represented by people like Wilson, Scott, and Hogg, did not speak so approvingly of that tradition as those of the second strain, epitomized by Thomas M'Crie (1772-1835). James Hogg, for example, painted a very dark picture of Calvinism in his book *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner*. The main character in the story, a "pious" young man, twisted the Calvinist doctrine of predestination to justify the murder of his brother. In 1817 M'Crie felt it necessary to vindicate the religion of the Covenanters from what he considered to be a hostile portrayal of it in Sir Walter Scott's *Old Mortality*. M'Crie's own scholarly publications of the *Life of John Knox* in 1811 and *The Life of Andrew Melville* in 1819 sought and achieved a renewed respect for these Scottish Reformers, formerly disdained by the eighteenth-century

²⁹ibid., 185, 163, 186.

³⁰ibid., 165.

³¹M.W. Gordon, 'Christopher North' *A Memoir of John Wilson* (Edinburgh, 1879), 241.

³²In addition to work(s) by Sir Walter Scott, Cunningham's reading journal included the *Ettrick Shepherd*, an idealized representation of James Hogg (born in Ettrick Forest and a shepherd) found in Wilson's *Noctes Ambrosianae*. Rainy, *Cunningham*, 23.

³³D. Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1961), 186-9; D.M. Murray, "Martyrs or Madmen? The Covenanters, Sir Walter Scott and Dr Thomas McCrie," *The Innes Review*, xliii (Autumn 1992), 166-75.

Moderates.³⁴

Romanticism's impact on Evangelicalism can readily be seen in the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, the leading Evangelical voice of the day. The periodical applauded M'Crie's work, calling the two books "the Iliad and the Odyssey of the Scottish Church," and its articles often reflected Romantic themes. The introductory article of the September, 1821, issue, for example, hearkened back to the simple, pure, and intensely pious days of the past beside the hearth of the Scottish cottar.³⁵ The current clergy were described as "sickly and time-serving drivellers," and unfavorably compared to the "pious...and intrepid" clergy of the Reformed and covenanting days, whose efforts on behalf of religion meant that in "the mountains and glens of this romantic land, which in other days were the scenes of horrible murders," the "only implements of warfare to be found among them were the bagpipe and the pastoral uniform...."³⁶

The Romantic imprint on Evangelicalism can also be detected in the Genevan revival of 1816. Robert Haldane, a Scottish Evangelical who had exercised a major role in the revival of evangelical Calvinism in Scotland, turned his attention to Europe in 1816.³⁷ Settling in Geneva, the city of Calvin, he delivered regular lectures on the letter to the Romans with the intention of re-establishing Calvin's distinctive doctrines (such as predestination, election, and effectual calling).³⁸ His efforts there resulted in

³⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 211.

³⁵"The Learning, Religious Influence, and Moral Conduct of the present Clergy, compared with those of their Predecessors," *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xx (September 1821), 572.

³⁶*ibid.*, 576, 573. The article venerated the faith of the Reformers and the Covenanters, though it did offer the following slight disclaimer: "We shall admit, in its widest sense, the monastic severity and sternness of the Scottish reformers; but may we not observe, that if their foible was austerity, their representatives have degenerated into one equally absurd, and far more inexcusable—licentiousness?" *ibid.*, 575.

³⁷Although Haldane was a Baptist, he taught the peculiar doctrines that distinguished Arminians from Calvinists. His views on baptism and church government were, of course, different from Presbyterians.

³⁸A. Haldane, *The Lives of Robert & James Haldane*, 3rd edn (London, 1853), 431-5. See also K.J. Stewart, "Restoring the Reformation: British Evangelicalism and the 'Revival' at Geneva 1816-1849" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1991); D.W. Lovegrove, "'The Voice of Reproach and Outrage': The Impact of Robert Haldane on French-Speaking Protestantism," *In Divers Manners* (St Andrews: St Mary's College, 1990), 73-83.

a revival with such depth of conviction and vitality that he helped create in Britain an idealized vision of the meaning of Calvinism.³⁹ Calvinism became the designation of a primitive, apostolic Christianity.⁴⁰

As a part of this revival of evangelical Calvinism, a stricter faith and practice began to reemerge within the Church of Scotland, reviving an already existing division within the Church. Since the mid-eighteenth century, two ecclesiastical factions, or parties, within the Established Church self-consciously arranged themselves on opposite sides of the Moderator's chair in the annual General Assembly.⁴¹ Those on the right side reflected the tolerant, rational, and optimistic ethos of the Enlightenment and were known as the Moderate party. Moderate clergymen disdained what they called the puritan "fanaticism" of the Scottish covenanters and believed that through "objective enquiries into the human mind, history, and the natural world...men could discern the natural laws governing the world and ensure that social institutions reflected the wisdom of nature."⁴² Through their support of lay patronage, the Moderates attempted to place "moderate and literary" men in Church livings and university chairs in an effort to "disseminate Enlightenment thought through the hierarchy of social orders, and thus to contribute to a general improvement in social manners and morals."⁴³

On the left side of the Moderator's chair sat the Evangelicals, who while also assimilating various elements of the Enlightenment, were nevertheless far more interested in the eternal fate of the individual soul than the purveyance of

³⁹Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 77.

⁴⁰*ibid.*

⁴¹I.F. Maciver, "The General Assembly of the Church, The State, and Society in Scotland: Some Aspects of Their Relationships, 1815-1843" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1977), 1.

⁴²Brown, *Chalmers*, 44; See also I.D.L. Clark, "From Protest to Reaction," *Scotland in the Age of Improvement: Essays on Scottish History in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 200-24; R.B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 1-75.

⁴³Brown, *Chalmers*, 44-5.

Enlightenment thought.⁴⁴ As the successors to the early eighteenth-century Orthodox party, or the “Popular party” as it was usually called after 1750, the Evangelical party emphasized the absolute need for personal salvation and preached obedience to God’s law as revealed in Scripture or as summarized by the Westminster Confession of Faith. Opposed to lay patronage, Evangelical clergymen maintained that neither the Bible nor the early Church sanctioned such a practice. They preferred that representatives of the parish congregation, whether male heads of families, or the kirk session and all the landowners in the parish, should have the right to choose their minister.⁴⁵

Although these differences existed between the two ecclesiastical parties, they had been played down for forty years.⁴⁶ During Cunningham’s time at university, however, they became the focus of controversy. In February, 1821, the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* described the Church of Scotland as made up of “two parties drawn up like hostile armies, for incessant warfare.”⁴⁷ The conflict dated back at least seventy years, but the more immediate background was the General Assembly of May, 1820. In that Assembly, held in Edinburgh, the Moderates declared war on the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, a periodical founded in the autumn of 1810 by Andrew Thomson and several young Evangelical clergymen. Under Thomson’s

⁴⁴In that Evangelical theology was simple, rational, practical, and placed confidence in knowledge derived from sense experience (assurance of salvation proceeded from a convert’s new sense of God), it also reflected Enlightenment characteristics. D.W. Bebbington, “Evangelicalism in Modern Scotland,” *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology*, ix (Spring, 1991), 6.

⁴⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 46-7.

⁴⁶For a Moderate perspective, see J. Inglis, *A Vindication of Ecclesiastical Establishments* (Edinburgh, 1833), 233 and G. Cook, *Life of the late George Hill, D.D., Principal of St Mary’s College, St Andrews* (Edinburgh, 1820), 209f. For an Evangelical perspective, see Sir H. Moncrieff Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1818), 474. For a concurring opinion from an outsider’s perspective see J.G. Lockhart, *Peter’s Letters to his Kinfolk*, iii (Edinburgh, 1819), 58. One of the factors that brought about increasing resemblance between the Moderates and Evangelicals was the conservative reaction to the French Revolution, which “made both the great parties in the Church more pronouncedly orthodox than ever before.” A.C. Cheyne, “The Westminster Standards: A Century of Re-Appraisal,” *Records of the Scottish Church History Society*, xiv (1962), 202.

⁴⁷“Letter to a Student in Divinity on the Parties in the Church,” *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xx (February, 1821), 73.

Evangelical editorship, the *Instructor* had regularly bashed the Moderates, and the Moderates perceived the punishment as a real threat to their already diminishing power.⁴⁸ Their fears were justifiable. A periodical that, according to evangelical Peter Bayne, found its way into 10,000 Scottish homes, the *Instructor* was establishing the intellectual ascendancy of the Evangelical Party in the Church when the *Edinburgh Review* was doing the same for the Whig Party in the State.⁴⁹

James Bryce, a leading Moderate, directed the Assembly's attention to a recent passage in the *Instructor* he felt needed censuring. The passage labeled the Moderates "silly drivellers" of whom "there is no injustice and no mischief of which they are not capable."⁵⁰ Bryce responded by labeling the *Christian Instructor* the *Unchristian Instructor* and called for the Church to take action to curb such excesses.⁵¹ A motion instructing the Procurator to take whatever steps necessary to prevent similar statements in the future in the *Instructor* passed by a vote of eighty three to eighty two.⁵² The July, 1820, edition of the *Instructor* retaliated against the motion by stating that they would rather struggle with Baptists, Arminians, Independents, and Episcopalians, than with Moderates, "the tendency of whose management of ecclesiastical affairs has uniformly been to depopulate our places of worship, to multiply the dissenters of every description, and to leave us little more to contemplate in this our favoured land than the mere skeleton of a Christian church."⁵³

⁴⁸As several have argued, the failure of the Moderates to block John Leslie's candidacy for the Edinburgh chair of mathematics and natural philosophy exposed an already weakened Moderate party. For a specific example of this argument see Clark, "From Protest to Reaction," *Scotland in the Age of Improvement*, 201.

⁴⁹P. Bayne, *The Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1893), 49. The *Edinburgh Review* was founded in October 1802 by a group of young Edinburgh Whigs (Francis Jeffrey, Henry Brougham, Francis Horner, and Sydney Smith) "with the aim of leveling entrenched academic and political interests, in order to create a more open society of free competition." Brown, *Chalmers*, 28; J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, 2nd edn, ii (Edinburgh, 1882), 436; W.L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland* (Glasgow: James Maclehose and Sons, 1916), 126. See also R.F. Burns, *Life and Times of the Rev. R. Burns, D.D.* (Toronto, 1872), 112-114.

⁵⁰"Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xix (June, 1820), 406.

⁵¹*ibid.*, 408.

⁵²*ibid.*, 436.

⁵³"Remarks on the Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*,

The Church of Scotland was again clearly divided into two opposing factions, but Cunningham's own religious transition during his University days reveals a more complex view of the existing divisions. His spiritual journey would span the theological and political spectrum within the Church, from a traditional Moderatism to a militant Evangelicalism. Although Cunningham later credited a particular sermon for this change, his transformation was a much more gradual process, beginning soon after he entered university and not yet complete when he finished his studies. When Cunningham moved to Edinburgh, he was an outspoken Moderate. This was hardly surprising, since he had been raised by a mother with a deeply entrenched Moderate perspective.⁵⁴ He had also been influenced by his uncle, George Cunningham, parish minister of Duns and a staunch Moderate.⁵⁵ Thus, according to one of Cunningham's college friends, "no young man ever entered college less acquainted than...Cunningham was with the Evangelical System, either as a creed or as a life, and to none could it have been more repulsively nauseous. With his characteristic frankness, he disparaged Missions, and thought it would be better were the heathen left alone."⁵⁶ Consistent with his anti-Evangelicalism, Cunningham "was honestly convinced," a friend later recalled, that the Evangelical leader Thomas Chalmers "was not sane."⁵⁷ Cunningham's own life provided no outward demonstration of Evangelical piety. An Evangelical who met Cunningham when he first arrived in Edinburgh stated that "at that period there was nothing to impress me with the idea of his being religious, though I supposed that he must be so, as he intended to be a minister."⁵⁸

According to an early university acquaintance, Cunningham at this time based his

xix (July, 1820), 501.

⁵⁴J. Bonar, ed., *Sermons from 1828 to 1860*, by W. Cunningham (Edinburgh, 1872) preface, xvi.

⁵⁵J. M'Cosh, *The Wheat and the Chaff Gathered into Bundles* (Perth, 1843), 6. M'Cosh considered G. Cunningham "of the genuine type of ancient Moderatism," not evangelical in any sense.

⁵⁶Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xiii-xiv.

⁵⁷*ibid.*, xiv.

⁵⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 26.

theology on that of the eighteenth-century Moderate leader, Hugh Blair, considered “the very type of the Moderate party.”⁵⁹ Blair had been one of a handful of ministers in Edinburgh during the second half of the eighteenth century who were responsible for galvanizing various Church of Scotland ministers into what became known as the Moderate Party. He was considered the outstanding preacher of his day, chiefly because he had painstakingly adapted himself to it.⁶⁰ By stressing the positive role of Christianity in the civilization process, Blair’s sermons sought to reconcile Christian principles with those of the Enlightenment.⁶¹ Specifically, this meant that Blair, like other Moderate ministers, focused on the moral and social aspects of Christianity. Stress was laid on those teachings of the Bible that inculcate civil obedience, peace among citizens, and subjection to authority. The fundamental burden of the Church was to exert a moral influence so that worthy citizens might be created.⁶²

Blair’s theology can best be understood against the backdrop of the theology of Robert Walker, an “Evangelical of the Evangelicals” and Blair’s colleague at St Giles (the High Church), Edinburgh, for nearly 25 years.⁶³ On 13 April, 1783, nine days after the death of Walker, Blair preached a memorial sermon in which he acknowledged that these two close friends frequently aired disparate opinions on various matters.⁶⁴ The impact of these differences, which found expression in their sermons, has been cleverly summed up in H.G. Graham’s *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century*: “the one appealed to the *elite* and the other to the *elect*.”⁶⁵ Specifically, their sermons reveal significant differences in two key areas: (1) the type

⁵⁹J. Watson, *The Scot of the Eighteenth Century* ([London]: [Hodder and Stoughton], n.d.), 168.

⁶⁰A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1973), 101.

⁶¹Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 63-4.

⁶²W.W. Benton, “The Ecclesiology of George Hill 1750-1819” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1969), 165-6.

⁶³J. Macleod, *Scottish Theology in Relation to Church History since the Reformation*, 3rd edn (Edinburgh: Knox Press and the Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 207.

⁶⁴R. Walker, *Sermons on Practical Subjects*, 4th edn, i (Edinburgh, 1784), xi.

⁶⁵Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 50.

of language used and (2) the view of the Christian life.

Blair's sermons were philosophical and ethical in language.⁶⁶ Walker's were theological and biblical.⁶⁷ Blair preferred the language of the Stoics: God was the Great Governor of the universe, the Supreme Ruler, the Supreme Being; "virtue" replaced "holiness." Walker preferred the language of the Bible: God was "God," and godliness was "Christ formed in the heart."⁶⁸ In Walker's sermons common biblical and theological themes were expressed in biblical and theological terminology—salvation, redemption, atonement, justification, sanctification were all frequently covered. Where Walker was perspicuous when discussing biblical and theological concepts, Blair was vague. Like other Moderate leaders, Blair envisioned an "enlightened Christianity" or "polite Presbyterianism" and happily acquiesced in the doctrinal cease-fire characteristic of the Enlightenment with its avoidance of troublesome speculations and finely tuned questions.⁶⁹

When speaking on the Christian life, Blair focused on the work of man; Walker on the work of Christ. Blair avoided the drama of salvation and according to one of his biographers, "never troubled his hearers with the soul-searching Calvinistic doctrines of original sin, total corruption, election, reprobation, and free grace."⁷⁰ Walker, on the other hand, freely covered the distinctive Calvinistic doctrines and frequently called his hearers to come to Christ for salvation.⁷¹ According to Walker, the preacher must make "Christ the principal subject of [his] sermons," must handle "every other subject of discourse in such a way, as to keep Christ continually in the

⁶⁶A.J. Campbell, *Two Centuries of the Church of Scotland 1707-1929* (Paisley: Alexander Gardner, Ltd., 1930), 136.

⁶⁷For a brief biographical sketch of Walker and an analysis of his sermons, see H. Watt, "Robert Walker of the High Church (Hugh Blair's Colleague)," *RSCHS*, xii (1958), 82-96.

⁶⁸Drummond and Bulloch, *Moderates*, 103; Walker, *Sermons*, i, 88.

⁶⁹Sher, *Enlightenment*, 64; I.D.L. Clark, "Moderatism and the Moderate Party in the Church of Scotland 1752-1805" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 1963), 7.

⁷⁰R.M. Schmitz, *Hugh Blair* (New York: King's Crown Press, 1948), 40.

⁷¹As an example: "Do you ask again, Who may lay claim to the benefit of this gift? I readily answer, Every child of Adam without exception, who feels his need of a Saviour, and is willing to accept him as he is offered in the gospel." Walker, *Sermons*, i, 254.

eye of our hearers,” and must make “the advancement of his kingdom, and the salvation of men, the sole aim of [his] preaching.” He further stated that if the above “be omitted, I can easily conceive it possible for a minister to preach all his life long upon the moral precepts of Christianity, without any other effect, than to lead his people away from the Saviour, and to carry them hoodwinked into everlasting perdition.”⁷²

In contrast to Walker, Blair rarely mentioned the name of Christ, much less spoke of such key biblical and Calvinistic doctrines as union with Christ.⁷³ He concentrated more on the duties of the Christian, believing that the purpose of preaching was to persuade men to become good.⁷⁴ His sermon topics betray his purpose: honor, sensibility, duties, fortitude, envy, idleness, virtue, patience, moderation, goodness, extremes in religious and moral conduct.⁷⁵ Though Blair made an occasional attempt at holding faith and works together, his emphasis on the latter, almost to the exclusion of the former, brought upon him and other Moderates the charge of legalism.⁷⁶ In presentation, at least, Blair gave his hearers a theology less than Calvinistic.⁷⁷

⁷²Walker, *Sermons*, iii, 57, 61, 64, 67, 65.

⁷³For examples of Walker’s discussion of doctrines such as union with Christ, see *ibid.*, i, 69, 70, 88.

⁷⁴Sher, *Enlightenment*, 166.

⁷⁵Blair, *Sermons*, iii (London, 1777-1801).

⁷⁶“The error of resting wholly on faith, or wholly on works is one of those seductions, which most easily mislead men; under the semblance of piety on the one hand and virtue on the other.” *ibid.* 355; “He who divides religion from virtue, understands neither the one, nor the other. It is the union of the two which consummates the human character and state.” *ibid.*, 20. R.B. Sher wrote: “This concern with moral preaching does not necessarily mean that the Moderate literati were the Socinians or deists that their critics have so frequently thought them to be. It simply means that they regarded ethical concerns as inseparable from doctrinal ones, as Hugh Blair argued in the first of his collected sermons, ‘On the Union of Piety and Morality.’” *Enlightenment*, 166. Though Blair made this point occasionally, it is obvious from even a general reading of his sermons that it is of only minor importance. Faith is not addressed frequently enough to reflect any real confidence in its necessity for morality; Benton, “Hill,” 146.

⁷⁷I.D.L. Clark stated: “Far from being indifferent to ‘orthodoxy’, the Moderates hoped to recall the Church to a more genuinely original and comprehensive conception of ‘orthodoxy’ than had been current in the 17th century, basing their teaching and preaching upon a tacit distinction between essentials and nonessentials, rather than upon exclusive and divisive *articuli stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. They were content to ensure that the Church of Scotland should display the basic ‘notes of a true Kirk’, without insisting upon the extended system of Scholastic Calvinism which had been elaborated in the 17th century.” *Moderatism*, 8. Clark’s implicit statement is that the Moderates were returning the church to a truer Calvinism, but in Blair’s lack of emphasis on faith, neglect of such fundamental doctrines as union with Christ, and disregard of relational Christianity, there is instead a

Though Cunningham received his early theology from Blair, he received his beliefs about Church-State relations from one of the present Moderate leaders, George Cook. Cook became a leader of the Moderate party following the death of Principal George Hill of St Andrews University. Hill had taken over the leadership after the death of William Robertson, a contemporary of Blair and a key figure in shaping the Moderate party in the 1750s. According to a leading historian of Moderatism, the Moderate party's ideal under Robertson's leadership "was cooperation with the existing political regime on equal terms, as befitted an Established Church...." They "frequently consulted with government; but they were not prepared to tolerate open meddling by Ministers of State."⁷⁸ Before the emergence of the Moderate party in the 1750s the Church had been "managed" by a succession of influential clergy closely tied to the Scottish administration.⁷⁹ The changes caused by the rise of the party meant that rather than being erastian, as they were accused of by the Evangelicals, the Moderates, for more than a quarter of a century after their founding, sought to secure the Church's independence from government management.⁸⁰

Robertson suddenly withdrew from Church affairs in 1780. Under the leadership of Hill, Robertson's successor, the Moderate party became more narrowly political in its ideas and scope, developing a close relationship with the Pitt Government, as represented in Scotland by Henry Dundas's political ascendancy. In return for unswerving support for the Pittite party, Moderates expected preferment to parishes where the Crown was patron and to the few sinecure Church offices.⁸¹ After 1819, Hill's nephew, George Cook, succeeded him as a leader of the Moderate party in the

sub-Calvinism, bereft of some of its essential tenets. For a helpful summary of essential distinctions between Moderates and Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, see Bebbington, "Evangelicalism in Modern Scotland," 4.

⁷⁸Clark, "Protest," 210.

⁷⁹ibid., 209.

⁸⁰Erastianism, the supremacy of state over church, derives from Thomas Erastus (1534-83), who opposed the power of the church elders at Heidelberg to excommunicate without reference to the city council.

⁸¹Maciver, "General Assembly," 9.

General Assembly. The departure from Robertson's ideal of the Church and State as equal and cooperating partners, a process begun by Hill, was carried on by Cook, who was, according to historian, I.F. Maciver, fundamentally erastian in outlook. A letter which Cook wrote in private to Lord Melville, the crown's patronage manager for Scotland, expressed his desire to see a high level of involvement by the State in the affairs of the Church of Scotland.⁸²

Since Cunningham followed Blair in theology and Cook in Church-State relations, he entered Edinburgh University somewhat erastian in his ecclesiastic politics and less than Calvinistic in his theology. These views, however, would undergo a radical change during the next few years, due primarily to the ministers he would hear and the friends with whom he would associate. During his early years at university, Cunningham attended various Moderate pulpits, but he most regularly attended the pulpit of John Inglis at the Old Greyfriars' Church, whose learned and eloquent sermons he greatly admired. Inglis was a leading Edinburgh Moderate preacher, but his Moderatism consisted more in his ecclesiastical politics than in his theology and his practical commitment to spread the gospel. He considered himself evangelical in doctrine, and at least one later opponent of the Moderate party agreed.⁸³ Consistent with the Evangelical party in the Church of Scotland, Inglis also held to a strict subscription of the Westminster Confession of Faith, not allowing for a minister of the Church of Scotland to append his subscription to the whole, while denying a single article.⁸⁴

Inglis's efforts on behalf of missions demonstrated his concern for the propagation of the gospel and his willingness to work with Evangelicals. In 1824 Inglis was the

⁸²ibid., 18; G. Cook to Melville, 12 January 1839 (NLS, MS 14838, fols. 77-8).

⁸³Inglis wrote: "if any minister, adhering to our standards, do not, in his public discourses, present what is truly *evangelical*—or, in other words, what is peculiar to the doctrine of the Gospel—in that prevailing and paramount view, to which it is entitled, as the only way of salvation to guilty and sinful creatures,—that man is unfaithful to the master to whom he professes to serve, and unfaithful also to those to whom he ministers." *Ecclesiastical Establishments*, 231; Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 197.

⁸⁴Inglis, *Establishments*, 236-7.

prime mover in persuading the General Assembly to appoint a committee for Foreign Missions and in establishing the plan for Indian missions.⁸⁵ His action in the Assembly provoked sharp criticism among more extreme members of his party. The advocate John Hope, son of Lord President Charles Hope and spokesman for this group, wrote to Melville on 5 June 1824 in scathing terms about Inglis:

Dr. Inglis has done very great detriment to the Moderate Interest during this Assembly—not only by unreasonable and ill-tempered pertinacity in fighting some questions which were untenable & on which he was accordingly beat; and by crossing and interfering with Dr. Nicoll’s management (for which the other seems quite unfit)...All entreaties on the part of Nicoll and Mearns were fruitless...The triumph of the Wild party was of course highly prejudicial. Dr. Nicoll thought that the best course was to let the storm blow over by...allowing the proposition to go to a Committee with the determination of strangling it. If Dr. Inglis will write to your Lordship on the subject I trust you will throw cold water on his projects.⁸⁶

Hope’s efforts failed and Inglis’ Mission scheme prevailed, but the episode revealed a fundamental division in the Moderate party between a very conservative or reactionary and a more conciliatory section.⁸⁷ Inglis’ more evangelical preaching and practice, coupled with his cooperative spirit toward Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, may well have softened Cunningham’s own feelings toward Evangelicalism. Cunningham would later acknowledge, however, that he did not hear in Inglis’s sermons one of the key tenets of Evangelicalism, the need for personal conversion.⁸⁸ The more immediate sources of Cunningham’s conversion would be

⁸⁵For Inglis’s impact on Scottish mission efforts, see I.D. Maxwell, “Alexander Duff and the Theological and Philosophical Background to the General Assembly’s Mission in Calcutta to 1840” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1995), 123-137. A similar missionary initiative had been quashed under Hill’s leadership of the Assembly in 1796. Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 197.

⁸⁶Maciver, “General Assembly,” 16. The “Wild party” was another name for the Evangelical or Popular party.

⁸⁷*ibid.*, 16.

⁸⁸Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xiv. Inglis is something of an enigma and hard to judge in this matter because only four of his sermons remain. In these sermons there is no call to come to Christ or any explanation as to how it might be done. Although the specific occasions for the sermons might not warrant such discussion, it is not unusual for an Evangelical minister to work such a discussion into most sermons. Inglis is a hybrid of Moderate and Evangelical practices. J.G. Lockhart expressed a similar opinion. Lockhart lumped him with Moncrieff and Chalmers and described the “filial respect with which” they “are regarded by the devout descendants of the old establishers of Presbytery.” He continued, however, by writing that Inglis “is far from exhibiting

the influence of the Evangelical revival, Evangelical friends, and Evangelical ministers.

During Cunningham's years at Edinburgh University (1820-28), the divinity student body was caught up in the Evangelical revival. According to a college friend, "...the Spirit had been poured out on the students of the Edinburgh Divinity Hall, and during the decade...from 1823 to 1833...much prayer and holy joy and zealous activity...were conspicuous...."⁸⁹ During his first session at Edinburgh University, Cunningham met fellow students who were Evangelicals, notably John Bonar and John Brown Patterson. Bonar was the brother of Andrew A. and Horatius Bonar, and like them was reared in a strict Westminster Calvinism. Patterson's maternal grandfather was the orthodox federal theologian John Brown of Haddington. Cunningham, Bonar, Patterson, and a fourth companion, Robert Johnstone, would become lifelong friends. When they went their separate ways after the Divinity Hall, Patterson wrote to Bonar, describing them as the "brothers four" and desiring that they would "meet together some day soon not merely to drink to one another's good-speed but to pray for it...."⁹⁰

In 1822, Bonar persuaded Cunningham, along with Patterson and Johnstone, to join the *Diagnostic Society*, a debating club founded in 1816 by Bonar's father and two other men. Time spent together arguing over the various issues of the day helped to cement Cunningham's friendships with these Evangelical students. The fact that Cunningham, an outspoken Moderate, found his closest friends at Edinburgh to be Evangelicals, no doubt created a tension in his own life which began to pull him in the direction of Evangelicalism. By the end of his third year at university, in 1823, he began to seriously question his relationship with God and consequently began an

anything of the same extreme attachment to the externals of the old Presbyterian Divines, which I had remarked in Sir Henry Moncrieff. He preaches, indeed, like a sound Calvinist," but he "might preach the sermon I heard in any Cathedral in England...." J.G. Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinfolk*, Letter 29 (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1952), 246, 248.

⁸⁹Bonar, *Disruption Worthies*, 195.

⁹⁰J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 16 December 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 92-3).

anxious search for personal salvation. He spent time praying, studying the Bible, reading theological treatises on salvation, and attending numerous Churches, as he systematically sought an answer to what had become an overriding question, “How can I be saved?”

In 1823, when Cunningham began his final term in the Arts curriculum, he continued to attend the pulpits of Moderate ministers. That winter, however, he became dissatisfied with what he was hearing and renounced his ties with Moderatism. And at the prompting of his Evangelical friends, he began to attend the Hope Park congregation of the Evangelical, Robert Gordon.⁹¹ He also started to worship at the Rose Street congregation of the United Secession Church, pastored by John Brown, grandson of John Brown of Haddington. During the same time, Cunningham frequently went to hear the morning lectures of Thomas M’Crie.

While Cunningham was seeking answers from the theologically conservative preaching or teaching of Gordon, Brown, and M’Crie, his closest friend, John Brown Patterson, was undertaking a similar quest. In a series of letters written between 29 June 1824 and 6 September 1824, Patterson described his spiritual pilgrimage as one that had progressed from intellectual faith to saving faith.⁹² At the beginning of the summer Patterson wrote that he had “lately been in a state of considerable agitation and interest with regard to God and eternity;” by the end of the summer he spoke of the “grain of mustard-seed that [had been] sown of grace in [his] heart.”⁹³

It would be surprising if the conversion of Cunningham’s close friend did not have a significant effect on his own advance towards conversion, but he later acknowledged that it was still a future prospect rather than a present reality. Between 1824 and 1825, he continued to listen with interest to the preaching of Robert Gordon. Cunningham’s affinity for Gordon may have stemmed from several possible sources:

⁹¹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 24-5.

⁹²J.B. Patterson, *Discourses by the late Rev. John B. Patterson, A.M., Minister of Falkirk* (Edinburgh, 1837), 123-142.

⁹³*ibid.*, 124, 140.

(1) Gordon was an outspoken opponent of Catholic Emancipation, a topic Cunningham debated in the *Diagnostic Society* as early as February, 1824, and voted against at least as early as January, 1825; (2) Gordon began his public ministry as a Moderate, was converted, and became one of the leading Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, who devoted many of his sermons to the explanation of personal salvation; and (3) Gordon's ministry was popular with divinity students, a number of whom were converted through his preaching.⁹⁴

Attending a service in 1825, Cunningham heard Gordon preach a sermon based on 1 Peter 1:23, entitled "The Means of Regeneration, Being born again by the word of God." In this sermon, Gordon offered no hope for salvation apart from conversion.⁹⁵ To ensure that no one misunderstood, Gordon delineated the nature of conversion. It was no mere exchange of one set of beliefs for another, but a spiritual rebirth. Because all are "universally declared to be guilty before God" and "alienated from the life of God," they must be born again, "raised from a state of spiritual death," and turned "from the power of Satan unto God...."⁹⁶ Conversion was also more than "external reformation of character;" it was a work of the Holy Spirit which was a "renovation of the soul, extending to all those desires, and affections, and principles of action, which go to constitute the true character of a rational and accountable creature...."⁹⁷

"That," Cunningham later said, "was the sermon that most deeply impressed me, and first led me to embrace right views of the truth."⁹⁸ Cunningham heard in this sermon one of Gordon's clearest expositions of conversion, but assuming that he had been attending Gordon's Church during the immediately preceding weeks, he would have heard about conversion every Sunday, including one sermon entitled, "The

⁹⁴ Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 225.

⁹⁵ R. Gordon, *Sermons by Robert Gordon, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1837), 219.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 216, 217, 218.

⁹⁷ *ibid.*, 220.

⁹⁸ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 27.

Danger of Delaying to Seek the Lord.” Gordon consistently made contrasts between believers and unbelievers and painstakingly explained the difference between external religious observance and the heartfelt practice of religion that results from conversion. A two-year quest by Cunningham for personal salvation finally found answers he could accept in Gordon’s preaching. Encompassed by the Evangelical revival in Scotland, and more particularly the revival of Evangelical religion in the Divinity Hall, befriended by Evangelical students, confronted with his closest friend’s conversion, and exhorted towards conversion by Gordon, Cunningham ascribed to Gordon’s sermon on regeneration the moment of his own conversion.⁹⁹ The changes Cunningham underwent during this time in both personal piety and ecclesiastical party loyalty were noticed by those who knew him, especially close friends and relatives, but not always with appreciation.¹⁰⁰ During the summer of 1825, according to John Bonar,

Cunningham’s esteemed uncle, the minister of Dunse, welcomed him...to his table as usual, but was equally mortified and surprised when, expecting him to take up and intensify some remarks that had been made on Moderate and Evangelical preaching, the young student, more fearless than discreet, calmly declared, ‘I have made trial of all the Moderate clergy in Edinburgh, and from not one of them could I learn what must a man do to be saved.’¹⁰¹

III

Cunningham’s allegiance to Evangelicalism would be solidified during his time in the Divinity Hall, which he entered in November, 1824.¹⁰² He began his divinity studies without taking his Arts M.A., something rarely thought to be necessary; even Professors discouraged it.¹⁰³ At the time of his entrance in the Divinity Hall, there were 249 students: 146 regular attenders and 103 irregular attenders (some of whom

⁹⁹Cunningham’s phrase, “embracing right views of the truth,” was one way he spoke of conversion. See his sermon entitled, “How to Estimate Repentance,” in Cunningham, *Sermons*, 24.

¹⁰⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 25.

¹⁰¹Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xiv.

¹⁰²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 29.

¹⁰³Bonar, *Disruption Worthies*, 194.

attended no more than what was necessary to deliver their required discourses). The fact of the irregular attenders was one of several problems identified during visits to Edinburgh University in 1826 and 1827 by the Royal Commissioners appointed by the government in London to assess the condition of the five Scottish universities and to recommend improvements. Other areas cited by the Royal Commission as needing correction included the length of the Divinity session, which was barely over four months; the lack of a professor of Biblical Criticism (there were three professors: Dr William Ritchie, Professor of Theology and parish minister at St Giles; Dr Hugh Meiklejohn, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and minister of rural Abercorn; and Alexander Brunton, Professor of Oriental Languages and Hebrew); the infrequency of divinity lectures (much of the Divinity Professor's time was taken up with listening to student discourses required by the General Assembly); the absence of examinations; and pluralities (at the time Cunningham entered the Divinity Hall all three professors held a pastoral charge in their parish as well as their teaching post).¹⁰⁴ The Royal Commissioners concluded their report regarding the study of theology by noting that "it is apparent that...extensive changes ought to be introduced."¹⁰⁵ A former student of the Divinity Hall interviewed by the Commission agreed and pronounced the more somber judgment that "the Hall was a place of little profit."¹⁰⁶

Cunningham, together with other students, often criticized the conditions within the classroom. Many thought Ritchie, for example, as Professor of Theology, unsystematic in his lectures, in part because he did not use a textbook in his class, unlike his predecessor and his successor.¹⁰⁷ Ritchie's sympathetic biographer admitted that Ritchie was also "jealous of his rights and privileges, and apt to be

¹⁰⁴*Commissioners*, 45, 47, 373; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 29.

¹⁰⁵*Commissioners*, 45.

¹⁰⁶The former student was Dr William Muir, minister of St Stephen's parish in Edinburgh at the time of the interview. *Commissioners*, 422.

¹⁰⁷T. Nelson, *The Life of the Late William Ritchie, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1830), 91. Andrew Hunter, a prominent Evangelical, held the Divinity chair prior to Ritchie and lectured from the *Theologia Christiana* of Benedict Pictet of Geneva (1655-1724). Thomas Chalmers followed Ritchie and lectured from George Hill's *Lectures in Divinity*, published in 1821.

impatient of any interference with his opinions, or his conduct.”¹⁰⁸ The worst criticism, however, came from Thomas Carlyle, who described Ritchie as “simply raying out darkness for a quarter of a century.”¹⁰⁹ To compound matters, Ritchie turned seventy-seven years old soon after Cunningham entered the Divinity Hall and, due to poor health, gave up his preaching responsibilities at the High Church (St Giles) in the fall of 1825 and his classroom duties in the winter of 1826-7.¹¹⁰ Several Edinburgh clergy then took turns reading Ritchie’s lectures to his classes.¹¹¹ In response to these less than ideal conditions in the Divinity Hall, students often read newspapers and engaged in conversation during class. About forty students, including Cunningham, would daily answer roll-call and promptly slip out of class, wasting no more time on what they considered a sham. According to Cunningham, “we called out ‘*Here!*’ but the next moment we were there no longer.”¹¹²

Thus Cunningham sought his education, at least in part, outside the classroom. His own prodigious reading provided one element of his instruction. For years reading had been a driving passion for him. When sent money from home to purchase clothes, he spent it on some irresistible book; when allowed time alone, he spent it absorbed in books.¹¹³ The summer months spent at his mother’s home in Cheeklaw allowed opportunity for extended reading. During the second summer there he began a journal of his reading, listing 80 books read during those five months. For the next six years Cunningham kept a journal, chronicling 530 distinct works (not including pamphlets and magazines) under the headings of classics, general literature, philosophy and science, and theology. The journal evidences his wide range of reading, his knowledge of Greek, Latin, and French, and his consuming interest with

¹⁰⁸Nelson, *Ritchie*, 88.

¹⁰⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 29-30.

¹¹⁰Since the summer of 1819 Ritchie had regularly employed an assistant to officiate for him in the High Church. Nelson, *Ritchie*, 81, 82.

¹¹¹Brown, *Chalmers*, 178.

¹¹²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 29-30.

¹¹³*ibid.*, 22, 23-4.

the Church controversies of the day.¹¹⁴

In addition to his reading, Cunningham honed his thinking and speaking skills in several among the numerous debating societies. He joined the *Diagnostic Society* in 1822, the *Theological Society of Edinburgh* in 1825, *The Edinburgh Association of Theological Students in Aid of the Diffusion of Christian Knowledge* in 1825, and the *Church Law Society* in 1827.¹¹⁵ Cunningham actively participated in the *Diagnostic Society*, serving as president between 1823 and 1827, reading essays, and debating the political, sociological, scientific, and theological topics of the day.¹¹⁶ Significantly, these debates reveal Cunningham's staunch conservatism: he was Tory in his politics, believed Church patronage and Church establishments to be expedient, and was against Catholic Emancipation.¹¹⁷

The *Theological Society*, founded in 1776 as a society for the students of Divinity in Edinburgh University, had as its goal "the mutual improvement of its members in theological science and literature...."¹¹⁸ The minutes of the society list no opinions rendered, but do give evidence that the Church controversies of the day provided the topics for debate. For example, Cunningham delivered an essay on the evidences for Christianity with a review of the controversy between Thomas Chalmers and Duncan Mearns of Aberdeen.¹¹⁹ Other topics included the Apocryphal question (the clash between Robert Haldane and the *British and Foreign Bible Society* over the latter's inclusion of the Apocrypha in their published Bibles); the different preaching styles of

¹¹⁴ibid., 22-3.

¹¹⁵Rainy stated that during the first year of Cunningham's attendance at Edinburgh University Bonar persuaded Cunningham to join the Diagnostic Society, but the minute books for the Society show that he became a member in 1822. ibid. 21; Minute Books, Diagnostic Society, 1822 (EUL), DA67.

¹¹⁶Minute Books, Diagnostic Society.

¹¹⁷This is consistent with Rainy: "At this time he was so sturdy a Tory that he would read no newspaper but the *John Bull*." Rainy, *Cunningham*, 24; Minute Books, Diagnostic Society, 15 December 1825, 2 February 1826, 10 February 1825, 9 March 1826, 22 March 1827, 13 January 1825.

¹¹⁸*Minutes of the Theological Society of Edinburgh*, vi (NCL).

¹¹⁹Mearns had challenged Chalmers' right to preach in the Church of Scotland because of imbalance (an emphasis of the 'external evidences' of Christianity and an almost total neglect of the 'internal evidences' or signs of election) in the latter's 1814 theological treatise, *Evidence and Authority of the Christian Revelation*. Brown, *Chalmers*, 114.

the two parties of the Church of Scotland (which is “more conducive to the interests of religion?”); the nature of conversion (“is it a miracle; does every Christian know the time of his conversion?”); subscription to the Westminster Confession of Faith (“Is man justifiable in signing a confession of faith, which contains some articles of which, however unimportant, he does not approve?”); and pluralities. At the 22 December 1825 meeting of the *Theological Society*, the students formed *The Edinburgh Association of Theological Students in Aid of the Diffusion of Christian Knowledge*. The purpose of the association was “to support societies for diffusing Christian knowledge at home and abroad, and to gain information about their operations.”¹²⁰ Cunningham joined with his friends Bonar and Patterson in this society, and served on the Committee for managing the business of the association.

In 1827 Cunningham, with several other divinity students, founded the *Church Law Society*, intent on gaining a fuller knowledge of the history, constitution, laws, and forms of the Church of Scotland. As in other debating societies, one member read an essay at each meeting and a lively discussion followed.¹²¹ Cunningham’s essay on the Constitution of the Church served as the introductory composition in an unpublished collection of essays.¹²² For someone so pronouncedly Evangelical, Cunningham revealed in his essay a curious amalgam of Evangelical and Moderate views as well as a surprisingly high view of the Church as he covered the doctrines of apostolic succession, schism, and the relationship of the Church to the State.

Admitting that his view on apostolic succession sounded strikingly Episcopalian or Roman Catholic, Cunningham nevertheless felt it necessary to call the Church of Scotland back to a doctrine he believed had been laid aside.¹²³ The doctrine, simply

¹²⁰ *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxv (January, 1826), 61.

¹²¹ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 32-3.

¹²² W. Cunningham, “Essay on the Constitution of the Church of Scotland,” 29 January 1827 (NCL, CHU 29).

¹²³ Cunningham did, however, believe that the Roman Catholic clergy had abused the doctrine by radically distinguishing between the clergy and laity, consequently bringing the doctrine into disrepute. Although the Scots Confession rejected apostolic succession, the *First Book of Discipline* dispensed even with the laying on of hands in ordination, and John Knox, Samuel Rutherford, and

stated, is that the authority of present-day clergy to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments derives ultimately from Christ, who commissioned the apostles, who in turn commissioned successors to govern the church. The commissioning of the successors, or elders in the case of the Presbyterian Church, occurs in ordination with the laying on of hands and prayer. Although Cunningham distinguished himself from many of his Episcopalian and Roman Catholic counterparts by insisting that “there was no magical virtue in ordination,” he believed that no one could prove entitlement to exercise authority in the Church apart from an unbroken succession of ordination.¹²⁴

Besides apostolic succession, Cunningham reflected his high view of the Church by decrying schism. Reflecting his new-found Evangelicalism, Cunningham charged the Moderates with the guilt of the secessions of the eighteenth century. This charge was not without some justification. These secessions had largely occurred as a protest against the Moderate-dominated Church of Scotland’s policy of patronage.¹²⁵ Contrasted with the leaders of the early eighteenth-century Church, the Moderates did not resent the presence of schism.¹²⁶ Instead, they saw both patronage and secession as advantageous. During the debate over the “Schism Overture” of 1765-1766, patronage was identified as the cause of secession from the Church of Scotland. Moderate leader William Robertson, write historians R. Sher and A. Murdoch, contended that “the institution of patronage ... had helped to improve the quality of the Scottish clergy” (by adding “secular learning and polite manners to their fundamental piety”) and that divisions in the Church were the inevitable and

Bishop Patrick Forbes held that true succession consisted in holding apostolic doctrine, Scottish Presbyterians have frequently held to a form of apostolic succession. See J. Walker, *The Theology and Theologians of Scotland 1560-1750* ([Edinburgh], 1872; repr. Edinburgh: Knox Press, 1982), 188-200.

¹²⁴Cunningham did, however, acknowledge that the need for regular uninterrupted succession was not absolute. Cunningham, “Constitution,” 12. Cunningham’s doctrine is similar to that of John Henry Newman’s (1801-1890), as set forth in the latter’s contributions to *Tracts for the Times* (London, 1834-1841). Newman was an Anglican and later Roman Catholic theologian who played a significant role in the formation of the Anglo-Catholic theology of the Oxford Movement.

¹²⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 221.

¹²⁶Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 127; Walker, *Theology*, 113-5.

beneficial result of the divergence of belief and practice in humanity.¹²⁷ In opposition to this opinion, Cunningham reminded his listeners that the Scriptures strongly condemned schism as sin, but likewise foretold of the presence of false teachers who would cause divisions.¹²⁸

According to his essay, any schism involved sin. There were only two sufficient causes for schism: (1) membership in a particular denomination required a person to do something sinful or (2) membership prevented someone from performing a necessary duty.¹²⁹ Therefore, Protestants had to be convinced that the reasons for leaving the Roman Catholic Church during the Reformation were justifiable and that those reasons still existed; and Seceders from the Church of Scotland must be convinced that the reasons for leaving the established church were justifiable and that those reasons still existed. Ultimately, he pointed out that everyone in Scotland should be a member of the Church of Scotland, as the “original stock from which the different dissenting denominations sprang,” unless “they are sincerely and impartially convinced, individually, that there are sufficient grounds for not entering the communion of the established church....”¹³⁰

Finally, Cunningham’s essay defended the Church of Scotland as an established Church, arguing that “the State is bound to protect and support the interests of Religion.”¹³¹ His arguments were mostly pragmatic ones. From the State’s point of view, the protection of religion helps to ensure “the preservation of civil society, and the prevalence of justice, order and subordination among men.”¹³² From the Church’s point of view “the existence of a Religious Establishment affords (humanly speaking) the only security for the performance of the offices of Religion” (by providing

¹²⁷R.B. Sher and A. Murdoch, “Patronage and Party in the Church of Scotland, 1750-1800,” *Church, Politics and Society: Scotland 1408-1929* (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd, 1983), 213; Sher, *Enlightenment*, 133; Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 127.

¹²⁸Cunningham, “Constitution,” 24.

¹²⁹*ibid.*, 25.

¹³⁰*ibid.*, 26.

¹³¹*ibid.*, 32.

¹³²*ibid.*, 33.

financial support for the clergy and by restricting this provision to those who subscribe to a particular confession—the Westminster Confession of Faith in the case of the Church of Scotland), “and for their pervading all parts and corners of the land.”¹³³ Cunningham gave two examples to support this latter point: (1) the success of Christianity in pervading the Roman Empire after being established by Constantine and (2) the failure of Christianity to pervade large parts of the United States because of the lack of a religious establishment.

Anticipating the argument of Dissenters in the Voluntary Controversy (which would begin in 1829), that any State connection corrupted a Church, Cunningham maintained that “the Church of Scotland has not from her connection with the State...violated any obligation that was incumbent upon her as a Church of Christ.”¹³⁴ Though he believed the Roman Catholic Church had at times received too much power from the State and that the Church of England had forfeited too much of its power to the State, the Church of Scotland had done neither. To clarify this point, Cunningham highlighted the essential power of a Church. The “first and fundamental right of the Christian church is, that she is subject to no earthly authority, that she has no other head than the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a principle which the Church of Christ cannot abandon without betraying the cause of her master....”¹³⁵ Although the Church of Scotland has her rights “confirmed and sanctioned to her by the law of the land,” those rights are not originally derived from the State but are part of the inherent power of a Church.¹³⁶ Cunningham then referred to a recent comment made by Charles Hope, Lord President of the Court of Session:

It was a missing of this distinction, simple and obvious as it is, which occasioned the broad and unqualified assertion of the infidel doctrine of Hobbes, in that strange display of ignorance, folly, and arrogance, which was made by the Supreme Civil Judge of Scotland in the General Assembly

¹³³ibid., 40.

¹³⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 221; Cunningham, “Constitution,” 41.

¹³⁵Cunningham, “Constitution,” 43.

¹³⁶ibid., 46-7.

before last (1826), a doctrine which made the Church in the fullest sense the tool and creature of the State. The doctrine was substantially this, that the Church of Scotland has no power or authority as a Church, but derives whatever power or authority she has or can have from the State, a doctrine the very reverse of which is asserted in express terms in our Confession of Faith, and is of course confirmed by the law of the land itself. Had the doctrine of the learned judge been the law of the land, then the Church of Scotland would have been bound to have renounced her connection with the State, which has thus deprived her of her inherent and inalienable rights as a Church of Christ.¹³⁷

Though Cunningham held that the Church of Scotland had not abandoned any of her fundamental rights to the State, most, if not all, Scottish Dissenters disagreed. They felt that patronage had destroyed what they believed to be an inherent right of the Church—the right of congregations to select their own ministers. Cunningham argued, however, that “the right of electing ministers cannot be shown to be...an inalienable right, either of the officebearers, or of the body of the Church generally.”¹³⁸ Further, he believed that “no right of the Church was violated so long as she had the uncontrolled power of determining...the qualifications of her officebearers, and no great evil could have arisen from it, had she faithfully exercised this power not only with respect to the qualifications of any individual to be an officebearer in the Church, generally, but also in regard to his special qualifications and suitableness for the particular charge to which he was appointed.”¹³⁹ In other words, only when the Church had ceased to exercise the popular right of the “Call” (a document signed by the majority of the heads of family in the parish signifying their approval of a patron’s presentation of a minister) had patronage become a grievance.¹⁴⁰ The State was not so much to blame for this, Cunningham continued, “as the traitorous and parricidal conduct” of the Moderate-dominated Church of

¹³⁷ibid., 47.

¹³⁸ibid.

¹³⁹ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁰The call fell into abeyance after 1760. Brown, *Chalmers*, 16. William Robertson, as leader of the Moderate party, “held that the Church Courts were bound to admit every qualified minister who held a valid presentation, whether he received a call from the people or not.” He further believed that the “call was merely the expression of the people’s good-will toward him” and because “it was recognised by no act of parliament,” “was not essential to his being ordained as their minister.” J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, 2nd edn, ii (Edinburgh, 1882), 368; Brown, *Chalmers*, 16.

Scotland of the late eighteenth century.¹⁴¹ Cunningham concluded his essay by expressing the hope that the Evangelical efforts on behalf of restoring the “Call” would correct this lone blemish on the Church of Scotland.¹⁴² Cunningham demonstrated his partisan Evangelicalism in the conclusion as he had throughout the essay for the *Church Law Society*, but his contentment (at least with the State) over patronage revealed that his Moderatism still influenced his view of Church-State relations.¹⁴³

Debating societies flourished in the nineteenth-century Scottish universities, sharpening thinking and speaking skills, and preparing students for controversy as a way of life. This was especially true for Cunningham, whose temperament was particularly suited to disputation. Cunningham had barely begun his studies in the Divinity Hall when he became embroiled in his first major controversy. The management of the Divinity Library, founded in 1698, had frequently been a source of contention between students and faculty.¹⁴⁴ An effort by a group of students in 1817 to gain student participation in the management of the library had failed thoroughly. A meeting between Dr William Ritchie, who was responsible for the library, and these students ended abruptly when, according to Cunningham, “Dr Ritchie would not allow the students to speak, and closed the meeting by pronouncing the blessing.”¹⁴⁵ The Senatus Academicus then took up the matter and decided that the management of the library should reside solely in the hands of the Theological Faculty. Discontent continued, and in 1824 Cunningham and a handful of other divinity students formed a committee to press again for student participation in library management. They believed that the students had a legal right to participation and

¹⁴¹Cunningham, “Constitution,” 48.

¹⁴²*ibid.*

¹⁴³The fact that many Evangelicals at this time accepted patronage, while hoping for its reform through a genuine call from the congregation, indicated that they had been partially influenced by Moderate thought on the subject.

¹⁴⁴Nelson, *Ritchie*, 75.

¹⁴⁵*Commissioners*, 484.

that numerous grievances could be averted if they were allowed to exercise that right. Specifically, they objected to the failure of the Theological Faculty to carry out the periodic audit of the library's finances, thereby concealing the manner in which student contributions had been spent. They also complained that the Theological Faculty failed to provide a catalogue of books, failed to pursue discounts on books purchased, bought some books of little use to the students (such as Hume's *Commentaries on Criminal Law*, Hutcheson's *Justice of Peace*, and Lightfoot's *Flora Scotica*), and often kept newly purchased books in a professor's office, sometimes never sending them to the library.¹⁴⁶

After consulting the Whig lawyer James Moncrieff, son of the Evangelical leader Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood, the students sent a petition to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Scottish Universities.¹⁴⁷ Referring to the 1817 decision, the petitioners stated that the Senatus Academicus had no right to interfere in the management of the divinity library, and that by appointing the Theology Faculty as sole Curators, it had deprived the students of a right to a share in the management, a right they felt entitled to because of their annual contributions (ten shillings per student to fund the library).¹⁴⁸

The Royal Commission came to Edinburgh on various occasions during 1826 and 1827 and on 10 May 1827 they interviewed Cunningham. The Commissioners were particularly interested in Cunningham's explanation of the Divinity students' claim to a share in the management of the library, a claim the students based largely on the original and recurring voluntary contributions to fund the library. Asked on what ground he believed the library to be founded by a voluntary collection on the part of the students of Divinity, Cunningham claimed it would be found in an inscription in the Donation Book. However, Cunningham continued, the "Professor of Divinity, in

¹⁴⁶ibid., 485; 195.

¹⁴⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 171; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 32.

¹⁴⁸*Commissioners*, 194.

1815, sent the door-keeper to carry off this book.”¹⁴⁹ In short, Cunningham accused his professor, Dr Ritchie, of removing the evidence the students needed to prove their right to a share in the management of the library.

In the event, the Commissioners acknowledged several abuses in the management of the divinity library, but declined to admit the students’ right to management.¹⁵⁰ Although Cunningham had not entirely succeeded, the affair was a significant event in his development. First, it was his initial struggle with the Moderates. For nearly three years Cunningham had thrown himself wholeheartedly into the fray, eventually colliding with the entire theological faculty, all of whom were Moderates.¹⁵¹ Second, it made him aware of his peculiar ability as a controversialist. On one occasion, after a long day’s meeting on the subject, a fellow student asked Cunningham if he were tired of controversy. To this he replied, “If my life is spared, it will be spent in controversy, I believe.”¹⁵² Third, it introduced Cunningham to the leadership of the Evangelical party of the 1820s, including both Thomas Chalmers and Andrew Thomson.

On 9 August 1827, three months after Cunningham testified before the Royal Commission, the leadership of the Evangelical party was generally acknowledged to have passed to Andrew Thomson upon the death of the current leader, Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood.¹⁵³ A little over a year later, Thomas Chalmers was appointed as Professor of Divinity and delivered his inaugural lecture at the University on 10 November 1828.¹⁵⁴ Cunningham’s comments on the lecture reveal that Chalmers had

¹⁴⁹*ibid.*, 483-4.

¹⁵⁰The Commission in fact rendered a split decision: two of the three commissioners involved decided the students had not presented enough evidence to warrant the right to a share in the management. *ibid.*, 173.

¹⁵¹Ritchie especially could be a formidable opponent. He was a partisan Moderate who wouldn’t hesitate to play the political card (accusing Evangelicals of Whiggism to the Tory “interests”) if he believed the occasion warranted it. Maciver, “General Assembly,” 10-11.

¹⁵²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 32.

¹⁵³Brown, *Chalmers*, 181.

¹⁵⁴W. Hanna, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Thomas Chalmers, D.D., LL.D.*, iii (London, 1851), 224.

struck a chord in the Romantic sensitivities of at least one divinity student that night:

He concluded with a splendid pleading in behalf of men of imagination and feeling against the charge of being mere declaimers; and shewed, with great strength of argument and force of illustration, that in theology, the feelings and emotions which the contemplation of truth is fitted to excite are the ultimate and terminating object of our labours; and that the discovery and establishment of truths, or the operations of the understanding on divine things, are essential, indeed, but still essential only as means to an end—that is, as the proper means of producing emotion or feeling in a rational being.¹⁵⁵

On the night of his inauguration, Chalmers sent a message to Cunningham, and the two met the next morning for a long conversation, in which Chalmers sought information on the status of the divinity library. It is also possible that Chalmers intended to win over a potential thorn in the flesh. Chalmers's candidature for the chair of Theology had been met with considerable opposition among the Edinburgh clergy, in part because they questioned his Calvinist orthodoxy.¹⁵⁶ As the generally recognized leader of the Evangelical students in the Divinity Hall, Cunningham had also harbored concerns about Chalmers's orthodoxy. They evidently got along quite well during this meeting, and many meetings followed in which they conversed not only about the library but also about Chalmers's plans for teaching. After meeting with Chalmers in private and hearing him lecture, Cunningham was won over, assuring his fellow Evangelical students that the "most surprising, and at the same time the most valuable, feature in all his lectures, has been the singular *soundness* and *correctness* of the views and opinions which they brought before us."¹⁵⁷

Cunningham's respect for Chalmers was obvious to Cunningham's close friend, John Brown Patterson. On 22 November 1828, Patterson, wrote to John Bonar, "I am

¹⁵⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 37.

¹⁵⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 182.

¹⁵⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 37-8. Cunningham would, however, register some discontent with Chalmers's teaching in a letter of 17 November 1829 to John Bonar: "[Chalmers] has begun Hill's lectures as his text book at the advanced class. He does not seem to have prepared a great deal of new matter upon systematic theology." W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9).

delighted to hear of the success of [Chalmers's] opening and of Brother Cunningham's high favour of the throne."¹⁵⁸ He continued, with a touch of sarcasm: "I perceive however his true blue democracy in the Library affair has been a little corrupted, and that he is become somewhat of a prerogative-man."¹⁵⁹ Cunningham had begun to enjoy the privileges of association with those in power. His quest for student participation in management of the divinity library landed him a personal share in the management with extraordinary privileges for a student. Chalmers, as part of his responsibilities as Professor of Theology, now assumed the oversight of the library and gave Cunningham the role of secretary-treasurer of the library.¹⁶⁰ It is also possible that Chalmers vested Cunningham with a good deal of influence over the purchases of books, satisfying Cunningham's complaints to the Commission about the dubious value of previous purchases.¹⁶¹

Cunningham would benefit greatly from his association with Chalmers, and the two later became close friends. However, in temperament, ability, and outlook, Cunningham more closely resembled Andrew Thomson whom he had also come to know through the library controversy. Thomson had given extensive evidence to the Royal Commission on various subjects regarding Edinburgh University, including the Divinity library. The information included in his testimony given to the Commission on 20 November 1826 indicated a strong familiarity with the library controversy.¹⁶² Whether their connection was a direct result of the library controversy is not clear. It is clear, however, that Cunningham established a close personal relationship with Thomson. He later considered Thomson a close enough friend to request his recommendation for a potential assistantship and only refrained from asking him to

¹⁵⁸J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 22 November 1828 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 88-9).

¹⁵⁹*ibid.*

¹⁶⁰W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 24 October 1829 (NCL, CHA 4.119.63); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 4 February 1830 (NCL, CHA 4.136.66).

¹⁶¹J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 22 November 1828 (NLS, MS 15998, fol. 88-9); *Commissioners*, 485. The students had wanted the right to determine book purchases, merely allowing the Professor a veto power as was done at the University of Glasgow Divinity library. *Commissioners*, 415.

¹⁶²*Commissioners*, 415-6.

preach his ordination service because he did not want to presume on his time.¹⁶³

When Thomson assumed the leadership of the Evangelical party in 1827, he brought to the position an Evangelicalism different from what Cunningham had experienced in his association with Chalmers and Gordon, different also from the previous leader, Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood. According to Henry Cockburn, Wellwood was “the steady champion of the popular side,” yet “the oracle of the whole church in matters not factious.”¹⁶⁴ Thomson, however, favored a more militant (and consequently practiced a more divisive) type of Evangelicalism and would attempt to mobilize the effective Popular (or Evangelical) party organization, created by his predecessors John Erskine and Wellwood.¹⁶⁵ Whereas many in both parties of the Church of Scotland were arguing that Moderates and Evangelicals were coming closer together in doctrine and practice, Thomson preferred to highlight the differences between the two parties, thus distancing himself from previous leadership. As a dogmatic reformer fond of debate, Thomson dedicated much of his tremendous energy and intellect to the pursuit of “heretics,” helping to facilitate the intensifying theological debate over the Westminster Confession of Faith, which culminated in the famed heresy trials of the early 1830s.¹⁶⁶

Cunningham would jump headlong into Thomson’s battle with the Moderates, but in the spring of 1828, he had more pressing matters. Having just completed his divinity curriculum, he found one aspect of the Evangelical revival a mixed blessing. The best and brightest young men had crowded into the divinity halls, which meant that in 1827, for example, there were five times more divinity students than the number of vacancies in the Church of Scotland.¹⁶⁷ Positions were difficult to obtain.

¹⁶³W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 24 October 1829 (NCL, CHA 4.119.63); W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 4 October 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 124-5).

¹⁶⁴Drummond and Bulloch, *Moderates*, 212.

¹⁶⁵Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 276.

¹⁶⁶Drummond and Bulloch, *Moderates*, 213; A.T. Craven, “Andrew Thomson 1779-1831: Leader of the Evangelical Revival in Scotland (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1956), 106; Brown, *Chalmers*, 213.

¹⁶⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 211; *Commissioners*, 371.

Ministerial students would often have to wait for several years to obtain a presentation to a parish; many never received a presentation. Aware of this difficulty, some divinity students had simultaneously studied medicine. Most, however, sought a job as a tutor or schoolteacher to bide their time. Cunningham wanted to go to the Continent before beginning a pastoral ministry, but the possibility of tutoring the son of the Marquis of Tweeddale there fell through.¹⁶⁸ So instead he spent his time supply preaching at various Churches, attending lectures, working at the Divinity Hall Library, and going through the probationary process.¹⁶⁹ His own views on the Westminster Confession of Faith were fixed during this process, if rather hurriedly. In a letter to Patterson after his own licensure on 1 December 1828, Cunningham admitted that he had not given sufficient time and prayer to the examination of the doctrines to which he had just expressed his solemn consent. Nevertheless, he continued, “with regard to the Confession of Faith, I think I can say sincerely, that I believe the whole doctrine contained in it. I believe to be true every doctrine which is really and expressly asserted in it, though I don’t feel myself called upon to maintain that all its statements are expressed in the most strictly correct and appropriate language.”¹⁷⁰

Cunningham experienced repeated disappointments while waiting for a presentation to a parish.¹⁷¹ In the meantime, his friends Patterson and Bonar received positions in the Church: Patterson the charge of the parish of Falkirk and Bonar an assistantship. In letters which Cunningham wrote to each upon receiving their appointments, he demonstrated his own evangelical piety and a true concern for these close friends. To Patterson, Cunningham wrote rejoicing in his new position and reminding him that the “great principle which a parish minister ought to always keep

¹⁶⁸W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 25 August 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 116-7).

¹⁶⁹ibid.; W. Cunningham to Anderson, 26 October 1829, (NLS, MS 10997, fols. 110-111).

¹⁷⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 39.

¹⁷¹J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 9 March 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 90-1); W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 25 August 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 116-7).

in view is, that the spiritual edification of the people committed to his charge is his direct, immediate, and paramount duty—the duty which supersedes every other.”¹⁷²

To Bonar, Cunningham wrote with the intent of encouraging him in his new position:

How do you like your new situation after you have had a fair trial of it? I daresay you will feel it very sobering. It must have been a great sacrifice to you to quit your home as it is a great privation to all your relations and friends. But I hope and trust you enjoy abundantly the comfort and satisfaction which generally attend sacrifices and exertions made for conscience's sake, and that you have also your reward in seeing the pleasure of the Lord prospering in your hand. It is a trying but at the same time an improving dispensation when a man is cast into a situation where he must derive his chief happiness from the resources and reflections of his mind, from communion with God and from the diligent discharge of his incumbent duties. I hope and pray that you may be enabled to stand the trial and to improve the opportunity.¹⁷³

Cunningham obviously cared deeply for his friends and considered ministry to be more than a mere job. It was instead a sober calling, with significant responsibility.

While Cunningham waited for an appointment he attended Thomson's pulpit and continued to develop his relationships with the Evangelical leaders of the day.¹⁷⁴ On 17 November 1829 he wrote to Bonar: “I spent Saturday and Sunday se’nnight with Dr Chalmers at Penicuik very delightfully. But nothing pleased me so much in his conversation as the way in which he spoke of Dr Thomson—the kindness and admiration he expressed towards him.”¹⁷⁵ Cunningham respected both men, but more and more he began to sound like Thomson in his anti-Moderate rhetoric. Asked to preach for Moderate ministers in Berwickshire, whom he did not believe to be Christians, Cunningham seized the opportunity to address their congregations (even staying an extra three weeks), with the purpose of preaching evangelical doctrines. In a letter dated 26 October 1829, to a fellow divinity student, Cunningham spoke of his time in Berwickshire and castigated his friend for supporting the Moderate party:

¹⁷²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 41.

¹⁷³W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9).

¹⁷⁴W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 25 August 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 116-7); W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9).

¹⁷⁵W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9).

By the by, have you never any misgivings of conscience about your support of the moderate party? [Being] one who is acquainted with the history of our church, and who knows anything of this religion it must surely be [obvious] that the principles of moderatism were founded upon a total disregard to the principles of vital godliness and to the religious interests and spiritual edification of the people. It is an unquestionable fact that the men who originally devised and established these principles were men who had not the fear of God before their eyes, and who knew nothing from their own experience of the converting and sanctifying power of Christian truth. And surely a corrupt tree cannot bring forth good fruit. And as the moderate principles were devised and propagated and established by men whom you cannot regard as Christians...surely it is improbable almost to the degree of impossibility that a system of measures for the provision...of the Christian church should be devised by mere nominal Christians, & supported almost exclusively by them, while it is as opposed by the real Christians to a man, and yet be in accord with the mind of Christ. And does not the whole aspect of moderation in all the features, both in theory and in practice wear the character of a system of mere...expediency.¹⁷⁶

Cunningham continued to berate his friend by asking, "What concord hath Christ with Belial? What part hath he that believeth with an infidel?"¹⁷⁷

This growing similarity between Cunningham and Thomson was recognizable to others. In the early spring of 1829, Alexander Duff visited Edinburgh to discuss his proposed appointment as the Church of Scotland's first missionary to India. Attending a debate by theological students, Duff heard Cunningham for the first time and later described his speech as "fraught with varied information, closely argumentative in its style, sharp in repartee, terrible in invective, merciless in its exposure of fallacies, and yet translucently clear in expression, without any flowers of rhetoric...."¹⁷⁸ At the end of Cunningham's speech, Duff exclaimed, "Well, well, if that man live, he will in debate and controversy, be another Dr Thomson."¹⁷⁹

Cunningham's years at the University of Edinburgh, first in the Arts curriculum and then in the Divinity Hall, set the course for his future. Entering the university with Moderate sympathies, he found himself immersed in the Scottish Evangelical revival, a movement which probably enhanced Cunningham's appreciation for

¹⁷⁶W. Cunningham to Anderson, 26 October 1829 (NLS, MS 10997, fols. 110-111).

¹⁷⁷*ibid.*

¹⁷⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 40.

¹⁷⁹*ibid.*

historic Calvinism, especially that of the Continental and Scottish Reformers. The Romantic movement in Scotland may also have encouraged in Cunningham a desire for a Christianity that was more than merely intellectual, a religion which was also heartfelt. Cunningham's friends, especially John Bonar and John Brown Patterson were also, no doubt, partly responsible for Cunningham's search for a heartfelt Christianity, a search which led him to worship at many of the Churches in Edinburgh, first at those with Moderate ministers, and then, dissatisfied with what he heard, at Hope Park, where the Evangelical, Robert Gordon, was pastor. In Gordon's preaching Cunningham found clear exposition of the nature of personal conversion, and soon afterwards he attributed his own salvation to a sermon by Gordon. During this time, Cunningham renounced his ties with Moderatism and shifted his allegiance to the Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, now as vehemently denouncing Moderatism as he once had Evangelicalism. His abilities were soon recognized by the two Evangelical leaders of his day, Thomas Chalmers and Andrew Thomson. Through Cunningham's involvement with the controversy over the management of the Divinity library, he spent time with both of these men, who not only appreciated Cunningham's talents, but also offered encouragement and friendship. Cunningham emerged from the library affair, which had lasted for three years, with the sense that he was called to a life of controversy. As he completed his studies in the Divinity Hall, Cunningham was staunchly Evangelical, committed to historic Calvinism, and headed for years filled with controversies.

CONFRONTATION WITH THE ROWITES (1830-1833)

"I thought it better to say to the man's face what I have been saying behind his back."

I

In a letter to a friend dated 26 October 1829 Cunningham mentioned the possibility of becoming assistant to John Scott, an Evangelical minister at the Middle Parish Church in Greenock (about twenty five miles northwest of Glasgow on the Firth of Clyde). Scott, who had suffered a sudden attack of paralysis at the General Assembly of 1829, could no longer lead worship and attended church only occasionally.¹ Since 1793 he had ministered to this large congregation without an assistant, but his infirmity now made assistance necessary.² Scott had written to James Marshall, minister of the Tolbooth church in Edinburgh, requesting him to recommend someone for the position. Marshall first asked John Bonar if he would be interested, but Bonar had already committed to become assistant to the Reverend George Brewster, minister of the parish of Scoonie in Kirkcaldy.³ Bonar suggested Cunningham. After meeting with Cunningham, Marshall expressed his willingness to recommend him to Scott. Not knowing Cunningham personally, however, he asked him to provide two or three recommendations which he could forward to Scott. On 24 October 1829, Cunningham wrote to Thomas Chalmers asking for a reference; Andrew Thomson and Robert Gordon had already agreed to the same request.⁴

The Middle Parish Church, encouraged by receiving strong recommendations from the three leading Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland, invited Cunningham to

¹J. Barr, "Memoir of the Author," *Sermons*, by John Scott (Edinburgh, 1839), xxiii.

²J.T. Hamilton, *Mid Kirk of Greenock: A Development and Social History 1741-1991* (Greenock, 1991), 5.

³James Bonar, *Jubilee Memorial of Saint Andrew's Parish & Congregation Greenock and of their First Minister John James Bonar, D.D.* (Greenock, 1889), 17.

⁴W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 24 October 1829 (NCL, CHA 4.119.63).

come to Greenock “to do the duties of three several Sabbaths, and of one week day, that a judgment might be founded....”⁵ Cunningham accordingly went to Greenock, preached seven sermons and returned to Edinburgh.⁶ At a meeting on 23 December 1829 the kirk session decided:

that, in their own judgement and in that of a great Majority of the Congregation, Mr Cunningham has supported the high character given him by so many competent judges of his qualifications so far as they could discover on diligent inquiry; and they therefore authorise the Moderator to engage him for the space of one year from January 1830; if his own life is continued so long; at the salary of one hundred pounds sterling.⁷

Cunningham moved to Greenock at the end of December 1829. The Middle Parish Church in Cathcart Square was already a large and flourishing concern, with its approximately 1500 seats normally full, but with Cunningham’s almost immediate popularity, the Church soon overflowed.⁸ Additional seats were erected in window recesses and spare corners, and the pulpit and gallery stairs were crowded.⁹ Some five months after Cunningham began ministering in Greenock, Scott, with the concurrence of the congregation, wrote to the town magistrates (the patrons of the Church) expressing a desire to ordain Cunningham as Scott’s colleague and successor:

To this situation Mr Cunningham’s relation to the Congregation and me recommend him in a peculiar manner. He came to us a stranger, recommended by the most competent judges, and for nearly six months has he more than sustained the high character given him, in private society, as a catechist, as visitor of the sick, or leader of the exercises of religious societies, and as a lecturer and preacher of the gospel. His youth, vigour and talents, his piety and zeal, with modesty and prudence, his learning and good taste, fit him in a singular manner for the arduous duties of this

⁵Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book 1824-1861, 23 December 1829 (Middle Parish Church, Greenock).

⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 43.

⁷Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book, 23 December 1829.

⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 43-4. J. Adam attributed the increase in seat rents from two hundred, twenty six pounds in 1799 to five hundred, sixty three pounds in 1833 to the “popularity of Dr Cunningham” and “to the increasing wants of the population.” J. Adam, *Greenock: As It Was And As It Is* ([Greenock], 1852).

⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 44.

parish and Congregation. To me he has been all I could wish in his situation, and to him I desire to be all he could wish in my situation. But while Mr Cunningham acquires esteem and affection among us in proportion as he becomes known, I cannot but perceive that he commends himself to other parishes looking out for a minister, and who naturally desire one so tried and approved. And could any one blame a young man of distinguished abilities for relinquishing an uncertain for a certain situation?¹⁰

The magistrates granted the congregation's wish, and the local Presbytery of Paisley ordained Cunningham on 15 October 1830. His friend John Brown Patterson, then minister of Falkirk, introduced Cunningham to his "flock" on the following Sunday.¹¹ According to one account, Cunningham had "passed almost at a single step from an unnoticed student into an eloquent and popular divine."¹²

Cunningham's initial success never abated during his years at Greenock, and there was apparently an increasing admiration for Cunningham.¹³ It was said that certain members of Cunningham's congregation would regularly follow him home from Church on prayer-meeting nights—simply to keep him in sight as he walked home.¹⁴ With his growing popularity, his name began coming up with reference to other vacancies in the Church of Scotland.¹⁵ The parish of St Andrew's in Glasgow, it seems, "pressed" him to become their minister, but Cunningham declined the higher position and the more than doubled salary because he did not "see that a superior field of usefulness was offered."¹⁶

Cunningham's success in Greenock and his growing national reputation were probably due to several factors. First, he devoted considerable time to his pastoral ministry, as Scott had stated in his letter to the magistrates. In addition to delivering the required Sunday lectures and sermons, giving the Wednesday lectures, and leading the young men's and young women's classes on Thursdays, Cunningham

¹⁰ibid., 45.

¹¹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 4 October 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 124-5).

¹²"Rev. William Cunningham, D.D., LL.D.," *BDES*, 419.

¹³J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 26 July 1832 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 101-2); 23 February 1833 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 107-8).

¹⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 48.

¹⁵ibid., 58-60; W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 22 February 1833 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 134-5).

¹⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 59.

moderated the session meetings, attended prayer meetings, Bible Society meetings, Anti-Patronage Society meetings, Greenock Seamen's Friends Society meetings, meetings on Roman Catholicism, and Board of Health meetings when cholera was rampant in 1832.¹⁷ He also regularly visited his parishioners. Cunningham's diary from this time records that he visited several parishioners a day, whether in the home or the shop, not only catechizing, but also indulging in snuff when he found someone of like mind.¹⁸ On 18 March 1831 Cunningham wrote Bonar of the benefits of visitation: "The greater the variety of circumstances in which divine truth is presented to men's minds the greater probability is there of its being brought home to their understandings and their hearts."¹⁹

The responsibilities of Cunningham's pastoral ministry left him "little or no leisure time," yet he was "very happy and very comfortable" in Greenock and found the people "very considerate in their demands upon [his] time as well as very kind and hospitable."²⁰ Cunningham felt the hand of providence in his ministry, assuring John Bonar on 24 July 1830 that:

I certainly have the greatest reason to be grateful to God for all his goodness in placing me in my present situation and in affording me the prospects which I now enjoy. And while I cannot but recognize his own hand in the matter, I cannot but be grateful to those also whom he has made his instruments in his dealings with me, especially to yourself who originated that train of circumstances which led to my appointment to a situation so well suited to be useful—to myself. And which in many respects affords me encouragement to hope that I may be made instrumental in promoting the best interests of others.²¹

¹⁷As moderator of the session, Cunningham engaged in various tasks—the more mundane, such as church discipline (most frequently for fornication) and the more sublime, such as petitioning Parliament for a day of national fasting and prayer. New Parish Minute Book, 30 January 1830, 2 November 1830, 4 December 1830, and 25 January 1831; Cunningham rotated with other local ministers preaching for the Seamen's Society at the New Chapel in the harbor and took a lead in the meetings of the Society. At the annual meeting held on 6 December 1833, he moved "that the sailing of vessels from port, and plying inland navigation on the Sabbath Day, involve a direct breach of the Sabbath, and ought to be suppressed...." To this the society unanimously agreed. Annual Report of the Greenock Seamen's Friends Society (Greenock, 1833); Rainy, *Cunningham*, 47, 51.

¹⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 49.

¹⁹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 3 March 1831 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 126-7).

²⁰W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 4 February 1830 (NCL, CHA 4.136.66).

²¹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 24 July 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 122-3).

According to his biographer, who wrote that Cunningham's "flock...grew more attached to him every day," his pastoral endeavors had a positive affect on his parishioners.²² Among other examples, he cited this incident:

A sailor had died at sea, leaving a widow and young family, one of them an infant that had never seen its father. Cunningham frequently called to comfort the sorrowing heart. Entering the house one day, he found the babe alone in its cradle, the mother having gone out on some little errand, as poor full-handed women must. The child stirred and began to cry, and when the mother returned the minister was busy rocking the cradle—a simple act, which, of course, never was forgotten.²³

Cunningham's ministry also benefited from Scott's constant "advice and direction."²⁴ On Saturdays he generally spent one to two hours with Scott discussing the intended sermon and lecture topics and on Monday mornings he regularly ate breakfast at the manse.²⁵ Cunningham wrote of his deep respect for Scott in a letter to John Bonar on 4 October 1830.

I hope he will be long spared to counsel and direct me. His death at present would be a loss that could not be repaired, and would add greatly both to my difficulties and to my anxieties.... And I know no one thing that would contribute more, humanly speaking, to my advantage and to the interests of Religion...that he should retain his strength and faculties for a few years longer.... He has uniformly treated me with real kindness and expressed towards me much regard and affection. At the same time I am aware that it is no earthly counselor and no human encouragement that can ever enable me to discharge those most important duties which...will soon be...upon me and I desire to cast myself wholly upon the real head of the church....²⁶

Scott survived beyond Cunningham's tenure at the Middle Parish Church and the two developed a father-son relationship. After Scott's death on 26 March 1836, Cunningham edited a volume of Scott's sermons in honor of the man's kindness toward him.

²²For examples of this see, Rainy, *Cunningham*, 48-50.

²³*ibid.*, 48.

²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵*ibid.*, 46.

²⁶W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 4 October 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 124-5).

II

Cunningham's energetic pastoral ministry combined with the seasoned advice of Scott no doubt contributed to his success. More than either of these, however, it was his emergence as a champion of Calvinistic orthodoxy at a time when that orthodoxy was being challenged that brought Cunningham to public repute and filled the Middle Parish Church beyond capacity. The challenge to orthodoxy came from the emerging "Row heresy," named for the nearby parish of Row where much of the teaching derived. During the 1820s a group of Scottish pastors and theologians had begun to chafe against what they regarded as the restrictive legalism and formalism of the Church of Scotland.²⁷ Influenced by the Romantic movement, especially in its sentimentalism and subjectivism, they questioned such doctrines as limited atonement, double predestination, and the emphasis upon God's wrath towards those predestined to eternal damnation.²⁸ Rather than the wrath of God, they placed great emphasis on the love of God, believing it to be "at the very heart of all true doctrine and religious life."²⁹ Furthermore, they held that assurance of God's love should be a regular experience of the individual. Consequently, they began to challenge the doctrine of the Westminster Confession of Faith and the accompanying Catechisms in which the love of God is conspicuously absent from the answer to the question "What is God?"³⁰ In addition to stressing the love of God, many, encouraged by the emerging premillennial views, began to look for the imminent return of Christ.³¹ The key figures in this movement were Thomas Erskine, John McLeod Campbell, Edward Irving, and Alexander John Scott, each of whom exerted substantial influence on the

²⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 213.

²⁸*ibid.*

²⁹J.P. Newell, "A.J. Scott and His Circle" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1981), 46.

³⁰I am grateful to Donald Macleod, Professor of Systematic Theology in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, for this observation.

³¹With the postmillennial view of eschatology, previously predominant in British evangelical circles, Christ will return at the end of the millennium, which is being introduced gradually, perhaps almost imperceptibly. Premillennialism, on the other hand, expects Christ to return at the beginning of the millennium, which will be introduced with a sudden, cataclysmic event.

others.³²

Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, nephew of John Erskine, the evangelical leader of the late eighteenth century, was a landed gentleman who resided near Dundee. Raised a Scottish Episcopalian, Erskine had imbibed Calvinistic Evangelicalism by 1816.³³ During the 1820s, however, after Erskine had become well known as a lay theologian in Scotland, he began to diverge from Calvinism. From an early stage in his theological development, he had been haunted by the premature death of many of his relatives, and consequently struggled to discern the action of a loving God in such events. Partly through these early struggles Erskine developed a theology that would enable him to communicate comfort and assurance to the dying and their families.³⁴ Erskine came to perceive of hell as a condition of alienation from God rather than a realm of punishment.³⁵ In his “enduring friendship for the whole of the human race,” God sought to end this alienation.³⁶ God’s salvific mercy, he argued, demonstrated in the unlimited atonement of Christ, extended to all persons, not merely the elect. No one, therefore, needed to fear being excluded from God’s love. This doctrine was present in a latent form in his first publication, *Remarks on the Internal Evidence for the Truth of Revealed Religion*, in 1820, but patently evident in his 1828 publication, *The Unconditional Freeness of the Gospel*.³⁷

³²For evidence of Romanticism’s impact on Thomas Erskine, see N.R. Needham, *Thomas Erskine of Linlathen: His Life and Theology 1788-1837* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1990), 118-120, 135-137; J. Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain* (London, 1885), 138-42; on both Erskine and Campbell, see O. Pfleiderer, *The Development of Theology in Germany Since Kant and its Progress in Great Britain Since 1825* (London, 1893), 378-382 (Pfleiderer argues that Erskine’s and Campbell’s development “is manifestly the same reconstruction of the Christian doctrine of salvation which was effected by Kant and Schleiermacher in Germany, whereby it is converted from forensic externality into ethical inwardness and a truth of direct religious experience.” Schleiermacher’s first major work, *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799) has been regarded as a theological expression of Romanticism. On Irving, see D. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 78-81; Drummond, *The Age of the Moderates*, 200; and Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 193.

³³Needham, *Erskine*, 15.

³⁴D.F. Winslow, *Thomas Erskine: Advocate for the Character of God* (Lanham: University Press of America, Inc., 1993), 2-4.

³⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 214; Tulloch, *Movements*, 141.

³⁶Winslow, *Erskine*, 4; D. Finlayson, “Aspects of the Life and Influence of Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, 1788-1870,” *RSCHS*, xx (1978), 71-98.

³⁷Needham, *Erskine*, 120.

The theology of John McLeod Campbell, the young minister of the parish of Row, developed along the same lines as that of Erskine. Campbell attributed his development to his experience as a pastor.³⁸ The historical theologian, B.A. Gerrish, agrees. "Like Martin Luther," he argues, "Campbell encountered the double problem of a legalistic piety: while the sensitive were intimidated by their shortcomings, the self-satisfied complimented him on sermons that should have disturbed their false peace."³⁹ Campbell recounted this experience:

Meditating with prayer on this painful ministerial experience, I was gradually taught to see that so long as the individual is uncertain of being the subject of love to his God, and is still without any sure hold of his personal safety in the prospect of eternity, it is in vain to attempt to induce him to serve God under the power of any purer motive than the desire to win God's love for himself, and so to secure his own happiness; consequently, however high the standard, correspondence with it may be sought under the influence of mingled selfishness, making every apparent success only a deeper deception. And thus I was gradually led to entertain the doctrine commonly expressed by the words '*Assurance of Faith*,' having...seen that the want of it precluded singleness of heart and eye in the service of God....⁴⁰

Soon afterwards Campbell concluded that unless Christ died for all "there was no foundation in the record of God for the Assurance which I demanded, and which I saw to be essential to true holiness."⁴¹

That Christ died for all was also the conclusion of Edward Irving after a walk along the shores of the Gare Loch with Campbell during the summer of 1828.⁴² Strikingly handsome and a powerful orator with intense evangelical passion, Irving

³⁸D. Macleod, Professor of Systematic Theology in the Free Church College, Edinburgh, has questioned the commonly held understanding that Campbell's theology derived from an effort to provide pastoral encouragement, citing the testimony of Peter Bain, teacher at Garelochhead. In a visit to Bain's uncle, then on his deathbed, he stated that "Mr Campbell said to him that he was in hell, and that he was worse than a pagan, because he did not see his sins pardoned." D. Macleod, "The Atonement," unpublished essay, 24.

³⁹B.A. Gerrish, "The Protest of Grace: John McLeod Campbell on the Atonement," *Tradition and the Modern World: Reformed Theology in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1978), 75.

⁴⁰J.M. Campbell, *Reminiscences and Reflections*, ed. by D. Campbell (London, 1873), 18, 19.

⁴¹*ibid.*, 24.

⁴²A.L. Drummond, *Edward Irving and His Circle* (London: Purnell and Sons, Ltd., 1934),

had risen to national fame in London as minister first of the Caledonian Church and then of a new Church in Regent Square built in 1827 to accommodate his overflowing congregation.⁴³ Irving's significance, however, lay not so much in the discussions of God's love as in his millennial teaching.⁴⁴ Since 1825 Irving had been preaching on the subject of the second advent of Christ, a subject which later became an obsession for him.⁴⁵ In 1827 he published a work by a Spanish Jesuit on the millennium (learning Spanish to do so) to which he contributed an introduction setting forth his own views on prophecy; in May 1828 he delivered a series of lectures on prophecy to large crowds in Edinburgh reflecting his premillennial expectations; and about this time he predicted the date of 1868 for the second coming of Christ.⁴⁶ Irving believed that the French Revolution (with its prohibition of Christianity), the renewed interest in missions, and the Industrial Revolution were "signs of the end."⁴⁷ One thing more was needed, however. The return of the Apostolic gifts. Irving began to seek these, which at first he felt "would only be restored at the time of the Second Advent."⁴⁸ But by the time of his meeting with Campbell in Row in 1828 Irving tentatively held that the gifts might belong to the Church of all ages. This view was held confidently by another man, who exerted a profound influence on Irving.

Alexander John Scott, who became Irving's assistant in 1828, was the son of the pastor of the Middle Parish Church, Greenock. Six months older than Cunningham and licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Paisley, A.J. Scott would have seemed the more likely candidate for assistant to his father. But his father and the Session chose Cunningham instead, evidently preferring Cunningham's theology. Cunningham later

⁴³Brown, *Chalmers*, 214.

⁴⁴Iain Murray has argued that Irving swayed British evangelical thinking from a postmillennial consensus to a premillennial one. Iain Murray, *The Puritan Hope* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971), 187-96.

⁴⁵Drummond, *Edward Irving*, 127, 138.

⁴⁶*ibid.*, 131; Arnold Dallimore, *The Life of Edward Irving: The Fore-Runner of the Charismatic Movement* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1983), 62; Brown, *Chalmers*, 214; Drummond, *Edward Irving*, 130.

⁴⁷Drummond, *Edward Irving*, 137.

⁴⁸*ibid.*, 138.

recalled the incident with the following words:

From peculiar circumstances, [Scott] was placed in a situation in which he was called upon, after he had been laid aside from public duty, to choose between securing what he reckoned a pure dispensation of Christian truth to his flock, and the accomplishment of an object which must have been dear to his strongest natural affections, and he never hesitated which side to choose.⁴⁹

A.J. Scott later described his father as someone who “might have taken his place among the divines of Dort.”⁵⁰ By 1829, when Scott chose his assistant, the younger Scott had substantially departed from the teaching of his youth and of the Church of Scotland. Already in 1827, when the Presbytery of Paisley licensed Scott to preach (and when, like all candidates, he was required to make a written avowal that he accepted the Westminster Confession as the confession of his own faith) Scott was questioning the doctrine of limited atonement.⁵¹ Shortly thereafter he “ceased to believe in the traditional Calvinism of the Scottish Kirk.”⁵² Concerned about what he perceived to be the “lifeless, palsied state of the church of his age,” Scott began to distinguish between regeneration and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁵³ With the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Scott argued, the charismatic gifts of the early Church could be experienced in all ages of the Church.⁵⁴ Late in 1829 Scott visited Mary Campbell, a resident of Row, and attempted to convince her of this belief.⁵⁵ Irving had already created renewed enthusiasm for the exercise of these gifts when he preached in Row during June 1828.⁵⁶ Approximately one year after Irving visited

⁴⁹Cunningham, ed., *Sermons*, by J. Scott, preface, v.

⁵⁰James Bonar, *John James Bonar*, 16. The Synod of Dort (1618-1619) asserted, against the teaching of James Arminius (1560-1609) and his followers (Arminians), (1) the unconditional and gracious character of election; (2) an atonement limited in its extent and design to the elect; (3) human depravity which is total in extent so that we cannot do any saving good; (4) irresistible divine grace; (5) the perseverance of God's saints.

⁵¹J.P. Newell, “Alexander John Scott,” *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd., 1993), 752.

⁵²J. Hunter, “Alexander John Scott,” *The Expositor*, xxv (1921), 394.

⁵³Newell, *A.J. Scott*, 64.

⁵⁴*ibid.*, 69, 71.

⁵⁵*ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 214.

Row and one month after Scott spoke with her, Mary Campbell and a group of her friends began to pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Fifteen miles away, in Port Glasgow, James and George Macdonald with others of like mind were also seeking the charismatic gifts, having been influenced by McLeod Campbell, Scott, and Irving.⁵⁸ Soon afterwards, beginning with Mary Campbell in March 1830, incidents of faith healing, speaking in tongues, and prophetic speech began to be reported around the parish of Row.⁵⁹ With the reports of these manifestations, "large numbers of devout Evangelicals and curious spectators flocked to Row, transforming the quiet village into a focus of national interest."⁶⁰

To many, these occurrences, now receiving so much attention, threatened the Calvinistic orthodoxy of the Church of Scotland. They could not, therefore, be left to run their course. Indeed, the Calvinist reaction had already begun. In 1828, the indignation of much of the Evangelical establishment was aroused with Erskine's publication, *The Unconditional Freeness of the Gospel*; in late 1829 Andrew Thomson began a series of twelve sermons directed against the teaching of Erskine and Campbell; and in early 1830 the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* assailed Irving's theology. By the time Cunningham arrived in Greenock in December 1829, some of John McLeod Campbell's parishioners had sent two petitions to the local presbytery of Dunbarton accusing Campbell of preaching doctrines contrary to the Confession. The presbytery convicted him of heresy by the middle of 1830, and the case was referred to the 1831 General Assembly. On 24 May the Assembly deposed Campbell from the ministry by a vote of 119 to 6; the next day it deposed Hugh Baillie Maclean, presentee of an Ayrshire parish church and intimate friend of Irving; two

⁵⁷Newell, *A.J. Scott*, 71.

⁵⁸*ibid.*, 72. According to Robert Story, they were led to expect and pray for the gifts by a sermon of Scott's. *ibid.* Arnold Dallimore argues that the Macdonalds had been influenced by John McLeod Campbell, Edward Irving, and A.J. Scott regarding the gifts. Dallimore, *The Life of Edward Irving*, 105.

⁵⁹Newell, *A.J. Scott*, 72; Brown, *Chalmers*, 214.

⁶⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 214.



days later it deposed A.J. Scott.⁶¹ The Assembly of 1831 also alleged heterodox teachings by Irving regarding the incarnation of Christ and instructed the presbytery of Annan, where Irving was ordained, to bring him to trial on a charge of heresy. Nearly two years later, after defending his doctrine in Annan “with a torrent of impassioned oratory,” Irving was charged with denying the sinlessness of Christ and deposed by the presbytery on 13 March 1833.⁶² In the following year, Irving died in Glasgow, “a broken man at the age of forty-two.”⁶³ Thomas Erskine, it will be remembered, was not a member of the Church of Scotland, and therefore the Church courts had no jurisdiction over him. Nevertheless, the heavy criticism he received for his 1828 publication continued, and with the exception of *The Doctrine of Election*, published in 1837, Erskine ceased theological publication after 1831. With the action taken against these men and the deposition of several other ministers for preaching similar doctrines, the Church had quashed, for the time being, a perceived threat to the theological fabric of the Church of Scotland. The Westminster Confession, which had “passed the test of nearly two centuries,” was revived as the doctrinal standard of the church, subordinate only to Scripture.⁶⁴

The Church of Scotland had acted decisively against the advocates of the Rowite doctrines. Cunningham, whose temperament was consistent with the prevailing mood of the Church, and who was already a budding controversialist, wasted little time getting involved in the dispute. He could not, of course, have known the outcome of the Rowite affair when he moved to Greenock at the end of December 1829. There he was immediately surrounded by the controversy, which he faced not only in the community, but even in his own congregation. Session minutes of the Middle Parish Church indicate that the elders had sought an assistant “likely to keep the Majority of

⁶¹Drummond and Bulloch, *Moderates*, 202-4.

⁶²J.H.S. Burleigh, *A Church History of Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960), 330.

⁶³Brown, *Chalmers*, 215.

⁶⁴*ibid.*, 215, 218.

the congregation together.”⁶⁵ The division implied in these words is confirmed in later session minutes and corroborated by other sources.⁶⁶ Members of the Middle Parish Church, for example, recounted that they were “at their wits’ end among the false prophets,” at the time Cunningham came to Greenock.⁶⁷ John Bonar believed that Cunningham was called to Greenock specifically to confront the doctrines being spread by Campbell’s preaching.⁶⁸ When Andrew Thomson heard that Cunningham would be going to the Middle Parish Church, he responded with “Good, he’ll be a capital fellow for knocking the Row heresy on the head.”⁶⁹ Cunningham, himself, according to his biographer, recognized that he was “set for the defence of the truth,” and “threw himself, heart and soul, into the battle.”⁷⁰ As a result, the Middle Parish Church quickly became known for anti-Rowite teaching, and Cunningham emerged as a champion of Calvinistic orthodoxy.

From the beginning, Cunningham confronted the movement with appeals to Westminster Calvinism, at times specifically addressing the Rowite doctrines.⁷¹ The Rowites had diverged from Calvinistic orthodoxy, not something to be taken lightly by someone who “found Calvinism in the Bible, in the Standards, in Philosophy, and in his heart.”⁷² Cunningham’s own sermons have been said to “hold Calvinism in solution throughout,” but, consistent with the teaching of his Church, it was a somewhat modified Calvinism, based primarily on the Westminster Confession of Faith.⁷³ W.G. Enright, a historian of Scottish preaching, has in fact argued that Cunningham’s sermons are “largely the exposition of the doctrines of the

⁶⁵Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book, 23 December 1829.

⁶⁶*ibid.*, 8 March 1831.

⁶⁷Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvii.

⁶⁸*ibid.*, xxv.

⁶⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 55.

⁷⁰*ibid.*

⁷¹For evidence of his authoritative preaching, see Bonar, ed., “Preface,” *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, xxv; xxviii.

⁷²*ibid.*, xxi.

⁷³*ibid.*

Westminster Confession.”⁷⁴ Although Cunningham was probably not unaffected by Enlightenment and Romantic emphases as well, Enright’s statement is not far from the truth.⁷⁵ Cunningham frequently referenced the Confession and Catechisms in his sermons and preached a series of sermons based on the Shorter Catechism.⁷⁶ In addition to the doctrines of “*sola fidei*,” “*sola gratia*,” and “*sola Scriptura*,” his sermons include the five points of the Synod of Dort, frequent reference to union with Christ (a prominent doctrine in Calvin’s theology, which found expression in Cunningham’s sermons through the language of the Confession), and a strong emphasis on God’s providence and man’s need for utter dependence upon God.⁷⁷ Cunningham never hesitated to present Calvinistic orthodoxy in his sermons. Though “once strongly warned, if not threatened, by an influential hearer, to leave the subject [of election] alone, he expounded it in a second Sermon and at greater length, the next Sabbath.”⁷⁸

Cunningham did more than preach on the general doctrines of Westminster Calvinism; sometimes he specifically addressed the Rowite doctrines. Against

⁷⁴W.G. Enright, “Preaching and Theology in Scotland in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of the Context and the Content of the Evangelical Sermon” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1968), 232. Enright has written that this “doctrinal” preaching “mitigated any really expository approach to preaching....” *ibid.*, 219, footnote 1.

⁷⁵Possible Enlightenment influence can be seen in Cunningham’s belief that “God’s ultimate object is to promote...happiness” in his people; further, “we are assured from the eternal and immutable Constitution of the moral universe, that every increase in Holiness will, in the ultimate result of things, be followed by an increase in Happiness....” Cunningham, *Sermons*, 3, 4; see also 47, 106, 180, 181. For evidence that this view of happiness was an Enlightenment phenomenon, see Bebbington, *Evangelicalism*, 60 and M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1994) 77. Possible Romantic influence can be seen in Cunningham’s references to “feeling.” Cunningham, *Sermons*, 34, 36, 38, 41, 43-4, 45, 107, 133, 156.

⁷⁶For references to the Westminster Confession of Faith or Catechisms, see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 11, 46, 47, 76, 89, 90, 279; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 47.

⁷⁷For examples of Cunningham’s references to *Sola fide* see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 27, 203, 205, 211, 212, 218, 219; for references to *Sola gratia* see *ibid.*, 107, 211, 215, 218, 222; for references to *Sola Scriptura* see *ibid.*, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 55, 70. For references to total depravity, see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 4, 8, 26, 27, 28, 80; for unconditional election see *ibid.*, 112, 147, 182, 183, 211; for limited atonement see *ibid.*, 176, 179, 181, 366-7, 372; for irresistible grace see *ibid.* 28, 145, 181; for perseverance of the saints see *ibid.*, 28 and 35. For references to union with Christ, see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 85, 88, 101, 150, 155, 184, 199, 209, 210, 211, 258. For references to God’s providence, see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 1, 3, 5, 19, 75, 114, 134, 135, 141, 183, 284.

⁷⁸Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxii.

Irving's alleged doctrine of the human nature of Christ, Cunningham held to the sinlessness of Christ, but acknowledged the similarity of Christ's humanity with ours:

To all this 'poverty' of ours—except only the actual guilt of personal sin—Christ descended. He became a partaker of our nature in all its helplessness, and all its sinless infirmities....⁷⁹

Against Scott's doctrine of the ongoing nature of the Apostolic gifts, Cunningham lectured through the Gospel of Mark, taking up the subject of "modern day miracles." These lectures apparently no longer exist, but Cunningham's position on the occurrences is evident in a letter to John Bonar of 29 May 1830. Referring to the excitement generated by the appearances of healing and speaking in "new tongues," Cunningham mentioned the Rowites' unanimous assent to the gifts and predicted that it would ultimately discredit them.⁸⁰

Erskine, Campbell, Irving, and Scott, it will be recalled, desired to emphasize the love of God and to encourage the assurance of that love within the Church. These desires led Campbell to preach the doctrines for which he was deposed: (1) universal atonement and pardon through the death of Christ; and (2) assurance is of the essence of faith and necessary to salvation.⁸¹ Cunningham agreed with these desires but not the conclusions. He too wanted to encourage the understanding and experience of God's love.⁸² He did not, however, believe that Campbell's theological deductions

⁷⁹Cunningham, *Sermons*, 109; see also 113, 163, 164, 165, 178, 195, 273.

⁸⁰W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 29 May 1830 (NCL, MS 15998, fols. 120-1).

⁸¹Simply put, someone must be assured that Christ died for all in order to possess personal assurance; with this personal assurance comes salvation. See Appendix for further explanation of Campbell's soteriology.

⁸²For examples of God's love, see Cunningham, *Sermons*, 16, 27, 28, 36, 50, 108, 156, 157, 162, 163, 164, 165, 166, 167, 174, 176, 179, 181, 185. Though Cunningham disagreed with Campbell regarding the extent of God's saving love, he deplored preaching that neglected the love of God. On "one occasion," wrote John Bonar, "when leaving a church where Sovereignty and Condemnation, the Law and Wrath, were the only topics, he remarked, with the compression of lips which was peculiar to him when inclined to be severe: 'We made short work with John Campbell for setting forth the love of God too loosely: perhaps we might do worse than turn our attention to those who preach the wrath of God as all His goodwill to men.'" Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvi. On his first visit to Greenock, he preached a sermon entitled, "The Believer's Security and Confidence," addressing the doctrine of assurance. Cunningham, *Sermons*, 1-19. Further, those "who are justified

were necessary for that result. Unlike Campbell, Cunningham maintained the doctrine of a limited atonement, believed universal pardon to be a gospel different from that of the Bible, and defined faith without mentioning assurance.⁸³

As the unlimited atonement of Christ, for Campbell, was the only basis for assurance, so it was the only basis for the universal offer of the gospel.⁸⁴ Again Cunningham disagreed. If the Bible presented Christ's atonement as being limited to "as many as were ordained to eternal life" and at the same time commanded ministers to extend the offer of the Gospel "to All men without exception or limitation," then believing the former should not prohibit practicing the latter.⁸⁵ Cunningham evidently lived with the tension apparent in this statement. John Bonar later wrote that "the more the Universal Pardon of sinners was insisted upon, the more did he proclaim the Universal Offer to sinners...."⁸⁶ Thus, according to Cunningham, holding to a limited atonement should not prevent the preaching of the unlimited offer of the gospel; nor should it hinder the acceptance of the gospel offer:

...no one...has any ground whatever to reject, to put away from himself eternal life, upon the pretence that it was never intended for him. The man who, upon any such pretence, hesitates or refuses to accept of the Gospel offers, and to trust in Jesus Christ as his Saviour, is only deceiving himself, and deceiving himself to his ruin. It is a mere pretence, destitute of any real foundation,

by faith ought to have peace towards God, —they ought to be aware of the love of God in Christ towards them...." Cunningham, *Sermons*, 150. "It is through the weakness of your faith, and the remains of indwelling sin, that you enjoy so little sense of His favour, —that you rejoice so little in the hopes of His glory. And it is, besides, your *duty*; for without this knowledge and belief that your sins are forgiven,—without this peace and joy in believing,—you are not fully honouring God's great scheme of mercy and of peace. And you are depriving yourselves of a great and important means of grace." *ibid.*, 151.

⁸³For example: "And for Whom was it that God delivered up His own Son? There cannot be a doubt that the 'all' here means all believers...." Cunningham, *Sermons*, 179. W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9). Rather than Campbell's view that the atonement places everyone in a state of grace, removing the judicial barrier which guilt imposes between the sinner and God, Cunningham held that Christ's death "removed every obstacle to our receiving the forgiveness of sin...." Cunningham, *Sermons*, 198. Through faith a person receives the forgiveness of sins effected by the death of Christ and is placed in the state of grace. *ibid.*, 149. See Cunningham, "Faith: its Meaning, Source, and Power," *Sermons*, 203-312.

⁸⁴J.M. Campbell, *Reminiscences*, 157; D. Campbell, *Memorials of John McLeod Campbell*, D.D., i (London, 1877), 50.

⁸⁵Cunningham, *Sermons*, 320.

⁸⁶Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvi.

through which the devil and his own ungodly heart lead him to despair and destruction.”⁸⁷

Cunningham’s bold comment stemmed from his belief that all who “come to God through Christ and believe in Him...will assuredly be saved.”⁸⁸

Cunningham thus, not surprisingly, disagreed with Campbell upon each of the beliefs for which the latter was deposed; he also differed with him concerning the foundation of assurance, the issue which initiated Campbell’s theological transition. In his sermons, Cunningham focused almost exclusively on the personal evidences of a life changed by the gospel, a stark contrast to Campbell’s emphasis on the character of God as he perceived it in the Bible.⁸⁹ Both men believed they were true to the Westminster Confession of Faith. Neither, however, expressed the fuller position of the Confession, which, in addition to the two foundations held by Cunningham and Campbell, adds the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit.⁹⁰ John Bonar attributed Cunningham’s emphasis on personal evidences to his dependence upon the Reformers, but more likely he was influenced by a prevailing view in the Church of Scotland.⁹¹ During Campbell’s trial in the General Assembly, for instance, an opponent remarked: “For by what test do the Scriptures teach, and the Saviour himself expressly enjoin us to judge of the faith that is in us? by the fruits of the Spirit—by the living evidences of a holy life and conversation.”⁹² Ironically,

⁸⁷Cunningham, *Sermons*, 320.

⁸⁸*ibid.*, 143.

⁸⁹For examples in Cunningham, see *ibid.*, 15, 33-5, 37-8, 185-6, 292, 295, 298, 302. For examples in Campbell, see Campbell, *Reminiscences*, 24; Campbell, *Memorials*, 50; M. Jinkins, *Atonement and the Character of God: A Comparative Study in the Theology of Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and John McLeod Campbell* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993), 234; M.C. Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology: The Doctrine of Assurance* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), 189.

⁹⁰Chapter eighteen of the Westminster Confession of Faith lists the following foundations for assurance: (1) “the divine truth of the promises of salvation” (equating to Campbell’s character of God), “the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made” (equating to Cunningham’s personal evidences), and “the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.”

⁹¹Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvi.

⁹²*The Whole Proceedings in the Case of the Rev. John M’Leod Campbell Before the Presbytery of Dumbarton, the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, and the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Greenock, 1831), 138.

Campbell may have better reflected the position of the Reformers, in that he relegated personal evidences to a secondary function, while emphasizing the foundation of the Bible.⁹³

To a congregation uncertain about what to believe, Cunningham responded with authoritative sermons based on the Calvinistic orthodoxy of his day (with few exceptions, the doctrines of the Westminster Confession of Faith). At times he spoke out directly against the Rowite doctrines. On one occasion, according to his biographer, he did so under unusual circumstances:

One Sabbath, about the height of the Row heresy, Campbell of Row himself walked into the Square Church, after the sermon had begun, and placed himself conspicuously in front of the pulpit. The discourse was one leveled against the Row errors throughout. Next day, one of the elders remarked to him, "Mr Cunningham, you were fortunate in having your discourse prepared for Mr Campbell's hearing." "It was not what I had prepared at all," he answered, "but I thought it better to say to the man's face what I have been saying behind his back."⁹⁴

Cunningham, however, did more than speak out against the new movement. On 28 April 1830, four months after moving to Greenock, he went to the Floating Chapel in the Greenock harbor to hear John McLeod Campbell preach. The Seamen's Friend's Society, founded in 1820 in the Middle Parish Church to "promote...the temporal and spiritual interests of Seamen...connected with the port," had organized a rotation of local ministers to preach in the Floating Chapel, and Campbell was one of those

⁹³One of Campbell's defenders during his trial in the Church courts testified that Campbell taught that "although a man's assurance did not spring from seeing any fruits of faith in himself, yet it could not be maintained where these fruits were not...." *Proceedings of the General Assembly, 1831* 68. According to historical theologian R.C. Zachman, Luther and Calvin held that there were only two foundations for assurance—the "external witness of the Word of God and the internal witness of the Holy Spirit." Both men, however, had a place for the conscience (corresponding to personal evidences) in their theology of assurance. Although the testimony of a good conscience "does not tell us about the grace or favor of God toward us," it does tell us about the "sincerity of our response to that grace in faith and love." In other words, the testimony of the good conscience, while not a foundation for assurance as such, does confirm "that our knowledge of Christ is genuine and our confession of faith sincere." R.C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 6, 82, 198.

⁹⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 57.

invited.⁹⁵ Cunningham took notes of the sermon, which were later used as primary evidence against Campbell in the General Assembly investigation.⁹⁶ He subsequently followed Campbell's case closely through the Church courts, at one point writing to John Bonar that it was now "too late to save his character," at another voicing concern that the charges against Campbell "may turn out not proven," since not enough evidence had been accumulated against him.⁹⁷

There was to be little relief for Cunningham from the controversy. On 4 April 1831 John Brown Patterson wrote to John Bonar describing a letter from Cunningham, who was "sadly annoyed with Campbell on one side of him—and a new Unitarian Chapel on the other...."⁹⁸ More trying to Cunningham, however, was his discovery, earlier that year, that Campbell's distinctive beliefs were held by a lay leader in his own Middle Parish Church. On 16 February 1831 Cunningham brought to the attention of the Session "the conduct of Mr R.B. Lusk," an elder frequently absent from church services.⁹⁹ Cunningham stated that Lusk had been attending the Episcopal Chapel, where the minister, Dugald Williamson, taught doctrines similar to those for which Campbell was deposed. The Session directed Cunningham, as Moderator, to speak with Lusk personally and report back at the next meeting.¹⁰⁰ Cunningham did so and at the meeting of 8 March 1831 declared that Lusk "admitted that he had done wrong in attending the Episcopal Chapel...and that he promised to make the New [Middle] Church in future his regular place of attendance...."¹⁰¹ But, Cunningham related, Lusk had been absent from the Middle Church because "he did

⁹⁵ Annual Report of the Greenock Seamen's Friend's Society, 1833, Watt Library, Greenock.

⁹⁶ For a complete transcript of Cunningham's evidence before the committee, see *The Whole Proceedings in the Case of the Rev. John M'Leod Campbell*, 17-19.

⁹⁷ W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 29 May 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 120-1); W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 3 March 1831 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 126-7); see also W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 4 October 1830 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 124-5).

⁹⁸ J.B. Patterson to J. Bonar, 4 August 1831 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 95-6).

⁹⁹ Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book, 16 February 1831.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, 8 March 1831.

not consider that the Gospel was preached there....”¹⁰² Lusk had told Cunningham that he could “get no food for his soul” there because Cunningham “not only did not preach the gospel but openly opposed the truth.”¹⁰³ Ten days later, in a letter to John Bonar, Cunningham stated that he had hoped to get Lusk to resign, complaining that the “self confidence of these people has the effect of sealing their course. They are so built up in their own vanity and they seem to think so little of...the deceitfulness of the human heart as to imagine that everything is right which they do and because they do it.”¹⁰⁴

On 20 April 1831 the Session again appointed Cunningham to meet with Lusk and discuss his “peculiar views of doctrine.”¹⁰⁵ Cunningham reported to the Session on 19 August 1831 that he had met repeatedly with Lusk and had “endeavoured to convince Mr Lusk of the erroneousness of his opinions but without success....”¹⁰⁶ Present at this meeting, Lusk spoke openly of his views, defending Campbell’s doctrines, while condemning the General Assembly’s judgement against Campbell. Unless the Church of Scotland immediately repented from that decision, he said, “judgements must speedily be poured out on the Church.”¹⁰⁷ He argued that the doctrine of universal atonement was “a truth interwoven into the very substance of every part of Scripture and one without which there would be no Gospel to preach to any sinner as such; that by condemning the doctrine of universal pardon, the General Assembly “had condemned the most important truth—the very foundation of the Gospel;” and that by condemning the doctrine that assurance is of the essence of faith and necessary to salvation, the General Assembly “had condemned a truth, not only

¹⁰²ibid.

¹⁰³W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 3 March 1831 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 126-7).

¹⁰⁴ibid.

¹⁰⁵Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book, 20 April 1831.

¹⁰⁶ibid., 19 August 1831.

¹⁰⁷ibid.

implied in every part of Scripture but also fully and distinctly recognised by the standards of this church, as well as of all the protestant churches; and which was in fact the great distinguishing doctrine of the reformation.”¹⁰⁸ As a crowning blow, Lusk stated that the General Assembly’s actions were “characteristic of that antichrist which was to come.”¹⁰⁹

About the time of this meeting, Robert Story, the parish minister of Rosneath on the Gare Loch who had defended Campbell at great length before the Church courts, wrote to one of the elders of the Middle Parish Church attempting to persuade him to support Lusk.¹¹⁰ His effort failed, however, and on 21 September 1831 the Session unanimously referred Lusk’s case to the Presbytery of Paisley for advice. Lusk acquiesced in the decision, and Cunningham and another elder from the parish were appointed to state the case to the Presbytery.¹¹¹ On 7 December 1831 the Presbytery determined that Lusk “can no longer be an office bearer thereof, and that [the Session] shall instantly deprive him of his office.”¹¹² The Session on 12 January 1832 unanimously agreed with the Presbytery and Lusk appealed to the next meeting of the Paisley Presbytery.¹¹³ The Presbytery dismissed the appeal and Lusk appealed to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, but again his appeal was dismissed, making the decision of the Session and Presbytery final.¹¹⁴ On 12 April 1832 Cunningham informed Bonar that he had “deposed Lusk from the eldership in Jan[ua]ry,” and that Lusk had fallen from his appeal to the Synod. Of this, Cunningham said, “I am very glad...as I had no particular desire to appear at the bar of the Assembly. I would however have

¹⁰⁸ibid.

¹⁰⁹ibid.

¹¹⁰W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 11 April 1832 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 130-1).

¹¹¹Greenock New Parish Session Minute Book, 21 September 1831.

¹¹²ibid., 11 January 1832.

¹¹³ibid., 12 January 1832.

¹¹⁴ibid., 18 April 1832.

been very well pleased had he carried it to the Synod as I intended there to have made an exposure of that poor shuffling inconsistent misty-headed creature.”¹¹⁵

In his dealings with Lusk and Campbell, Cunningham, along with probably the majority of ministers in the Church of Scotland, reacted strongly to this perceived threat to Westminster Calvinism. It might be argued that this reaction was simply an obligatory response to ministers and elders who were no longer willing to adhere to the theology of their Church. Men like Lusk and Campbell had clearly “reneged in their vows to uphold the Westminster Confession, which remained the Church’s standard of faith....”¹¹⁶ But the Church courts had not always been so severe in their censures.¹¹⁷ So why now the strong reaction? In part, their response was influenced by the Evangelical revival, now reaching the high point of its influence in Scotland.¹¹⁸ With this revival, it will be recalled, came a renaissance of appreciation for Scotland’s historic Church, a Church whose authority was protected by the State and whose doctrine was safeguarded by the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Rowite movement represented a threat to both the authority and the doctrine of the Church of Scotland.

The authority of the national Church was bound up in its established relationship with the State, a relationship Cunningham felt crucial to the success of the Church’s endeavors. Writing in 1827 as a student, he argued that:

¹¹⁵W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 11 April 1832 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 130-1).

¹¹⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 215.

¹¹⁷John Simson, for example, “Professor of Divinity at Glasgow, was accused of Arianism a second time in 1726, and suspended indefinitely—not deposed or deprived—in 1729.” D.F. Wright, “Heresy, Heresy Trials,” *DSCHT*, 400.

¹¹⁸It should be added that the *Edinburgh Christian Instructor* contributed to the spirit in the Church which resulted in the censure of these men. The Evangelical revival, it will be recalled, had brought about a greater religious intensity in the general populace. The *Instructor*, “ever on the watch for the orthodoxy of the Church,” helped to focus this intensity into a heresy-hunting attitude within the Church of Scotland. Tulloch, *Movements of Religious Thought in Britain*, 163.

...the due effect of Religion upon the minds of men, must, in the ordinary course of God's providence, depend very much upon the manner in which its doctrines are taught, its duties enforced, and its rites performed, and these must evidently depend in a considerable degree on the institutions and circumstances of civil Society, and may therefore be materially aided or obstructed in their influence by the civil power.¹¹⁹

Furthermore, he wrote, there "is then a complete and perfect obligation upon the State to protect and support Religion (and this can be done only by a Religious Establishment)...."¹²⁰

This relationship between Church and State, which Cunningham believed "(humanly speaking) the only security for the performance of the office of Religion, and for their pervading all parts and corners of the land," was potentially jeopardized by the Row affair.¹²¹ The national Church was bound, not only by its own legislation, but more significantly by that of the State, to uphold the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Rowites' questioning of the Confession, therefore, might strain this constitutional relationship. Indeed, the records of the trial of John McLeod Campbell reveal a "sensitivity to the importance of the Westminster Confession as a symbol of the Scottish Establishment."¹²² Dr Fleming of Old Kirkpatrick in Dunbartonshire, for example, argued that "the Church must stand by its compact with the State under which it must teach what is set out in the Westminster documents."¹²³

This sensitivity to protecting the Church's established relationship was no doubt affected by its political context, which the historian of British politics, G.F.A. Best,

¹¹⁹Cunningham, "Essay on the Constitution of the Church of Scotland," 29 January 1827 (NCL, CHU 29), 37.

¹²⁰*ibid.*

¹²¹*ibid.*, 40.

¹²²G.M. Tuttle, *So Rich A Soil: John McLeod Campbell on Christian Atonement* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1986), 147, endnote 21.

¹²³J. Macintyre, "John McLeod Campbell—Heretic and Saint," *RSCHS*, xiv (1963), 62.

has designated the constitutional revolution. The *formal* beginning of this revolution, he writes, was in 1828, when it was remarked that the state “virtually renounced every connexion with religion.”¹²⁴ That was the year of the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, penal statutes restricting (at least in theory) the political rights of Protestant Dissenters in England and Wales. For the Church of England, who heretofore enjoyed a privileged status, this meant the abandonment of “an essential principle, that of establishment’s legal and political superiority over the nonconformists....”¹²⁵ For the Church of Scotland, the more significant issue was the impetus this could give to Catholic emancipation. “For if Dissenters,” argues the Church historian S.J. Brown, “could be granted full political rights, it meant that the British State might also admit Catholics into the political constitution without further sacrifice of principle.”¹²⁶ Leaders of both parties in the Church of Scotland therefore avoided making any statements about the proposed repeal during the early part of 1828, not wishing to encourage the cause of Catholic Emancipation.¹²⁷

Nonetheless, the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts went into effect in early May 1828, and with it began increased agitation for Catholic emancipation.¹²⁸ By the middle of April 1829 this agitation achieved its purposed effect, when Catholic emancipation became a reality, removing the civil disabilities which Catholics had labored under for many of the years since the Reformation.¹²⁹ No longer were Roman Catholics restricted from being elected to Parliament or being appointed to many

¹²⁴G.F.A. Best, “The Constitutional Revolution, 1828-32 and its Consequences for the Established Church,” *Theology*, lxii (1959), 226.

¹²⁵*ibid.*, 228.

¹²⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 184.

¹²⁷*ibid.*, 184-5.

¹²⁸*ibid.*, 185.

¹²⁹A.B. Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy in the Church of Scotland 1829-1843” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1953), 4.

administrative and judicial offices.¹³⁰ Though the bill for Catholic emancipation went through Parliament fairly quickly, it was not without its detractors in Scotland. In the southwest and north especially, where the heritage of the Covenanters remained particularly strong, there were incidents of mob violence. Numerous petitions were sent to the House of Commons, the House of Lords, and even to the king himself, the vast majority of which were against “further concessions to the Irish papists.”¹³¹

It might seem curious that concessions primarily for the benefit of the large majority of Roman Catholic subjects in Ireland would cause such an uproar in Scotland, and many explanations have been offered. One, of course, is the historical antagonism of Scottish Protestants towards Roman Catholicism. But probably the more significant rationale is encapsulated in one of the petitions sent to Parliament. The Incorporation of Hammermen believed that the intended legislation would “subvert the Protestant Constitution in Church and State established at the glorious era of the Revolution.”¹³² In other words, the government’s policy could be perceived as “an attack on a ‘truly Scottish’ (i.e. Protestant) way of life.”¹³³ By Act of Parliament, Presbyterianism had obtained a final establishment in Scotland in the Revolution Settlement of 1690.¹³⁴ This settlement secured certain rights and privileges for Presbyterians and was viewed by some as a “contract against popery.”¹³⁵ The introduction of Roman Catholics to Parliament might in time undermine both the establishment of Presbyterianism specifically and the

¹³⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 188-9.

¹³¹I.A. Muirhead, “Catholic Emancipation: Scottish Reactions in 1829,” *Innes Review*, xxiv (1972), 27, 30.

¹³²*ibid.*, 27.

¹³³*ibid.*, 32.

¹³⁴M. Lynch, *Scotland: A New History*, (London: Pimlico, 1993), 394.

¹³⁵W.L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns*, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 5.

establishment of Protestantism generally. This fear was real enough to find expression in the Catholic Emancipation Act's requirement of all Roman Catholics to disavow "any intent to subvert the Protestant religion" before taking office.¹³⁶

In late July 1830 news of revolution in France reached Scotland, enhancing in the minds of some the fear of displacement of the Protestant Constitution. With another toppling of the Bourbon monarchy, "the contagion of revolution spread to neighbouring states."¹³⁷ Many traced the true beginning of the Constitutional revolution to the French Revolution of 1789-1799 and the movements associated with it.¹³⁸ Now the threat revived. The substance of the threat was atheism, democracy, tyranny, and the destruction of religious establishment, and according to one observer, could overthrow all of the ancient institutions of the British Empire.¹³⁹

One who looked at the events in France with some trepidation was Thomas Chalmers. His fear that a revolution mentality would affect Britain was increased, writes S.J. Brown,

when three months later, on 15 November 1830, the loose coalition of Whigs, Radicals, independents, and ultra-Tories in Parliament brought down Wellington's Tory Government. The king now summoned Earl Grey, leader of the Whig party, to form a Government. For the Whigs, this meant a return to power after nearly twenty-five years in opposition (and in substance, much longer). They were no longer a coherent political party, nor could they count upon a clear majority in the Commons. None the less, they assumed responsibility with a single-minded commitment to introduce a bill for Parliamentary reform.¹⁴⁰

In March 1831, the Whig Government introduced its Parliamentary reform bill, proposing among other things to extend the franchise to all £10 householders (renters

¹³⁶J.R. Wolfe, "Catholic Emancipation," *DSCHT*, 149.

¹³⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 193.

¹³⁸Best, "The Constitutional Revolution," 226-7.

¹³⁹*ibid.*, 227.

¹⁴⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 194.

or owners of buildings of an annual value of £10) in Parliamentary burghs.¹⁴¹

Chalmers opposed the bill particularly because he “feared that the enlarged electorate would soon encroach upon the privileges and endowments of the national religious Establishments.”¹⁴² Nevertheless, the bill became law in 1832.

Amid the dramatic political events of 1828-32, the threat to the established Church of Scotland by the Rowite challenge to the Westminster standards assumed a heightened significance. Adding to this were the exercises of some of the followers of the Rowite movement. Along with sincere Christians, the movement attracted a number of individuals with questionable motives, many of whom claimed the gifts of healing and tongues out of a desire for mere self-aggrandizement. Indwelt by the Holy Spirit, “they recognized no other authority or discipline, including that of the Church.”¹⁴³ Thus they endangered another of Cunningham’s cherished notions, the institutional Church of Scotland with its presbyterian form of government and discipline. His exuberance for the institution is evident in a letter to his friend J.B. Patterson written in late 1829:

What an admirable system ours is for the Christian government of a country! and how admirably suited, when administered by faithful men, for subordinating all the relations of society and all the occupations of life, as well as the duties resulting from them, to the obligations incumbent upon men as members of Christ’s church and subjects of Christ’s authority. In fact, I do not recollect in the history of Christianity, anything at all corresponding to the idea of a Christian Church except what was exemplified when Presbyterianism flourished in all its glory and in its strength. There is no other example of a country where Christianity, viewed both as a system of government and discipline, so moulded the general aspect of society, and gave it its peculiar and distinctive character. There is no example of a nation, where all the obligations incumbent upon men as members of the Christian Church were so thoroughly enforced, and so generally and distinctly recognised as operating principles.¹⁴⁴

Clearly, Cunningham prized both the institutional Church of Scotland and its

¹⁴¹ibid.

¹⁴²ibid.

¹⁴³ibid., 216.

¹⁴⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 45-6.

established relationship with the State, both of which were potentially imperiled by the Rowite movement. But perhaps even more important in his mind was the Church's doctrine, as defined by the Westminster Confession of Faith. This he believed the Rowites seriously jeopardized. The Rowite movement in fact has been described as the first significant challenge to the Westminster Confession of Faith within the Church of Scotland.¹⁴⁵ Commitment to the Confession had already been diluted in other Scottish Presbyterian churches.¹⁴⁶ These changes, however, were outwith the National Church and affected only the "mere outworks" of the Confession.¹⁴⁷ "So far," writes A.C. Cheyne, "no really determined attack had been made on any central tenet of the Confession...."¹⁴⁸ The Rowite controversy, however, was not only internal to the Church of Scotland, but also represented an assault upon the "inner defences," the "characteristic doctrines of scholastic Calvinism."¹⁴⁹

Cunningham believed that in their modified doctrine of the atonement, Erskine, Campbell, Irving, and Scott had compromised not only the Confession, but also the Bible and even the Gospel. According to Bonar, Cunningham maintained that "as the Bible is the meaning of God, so the Confession is the meaning of the Bible."¹⁵⁰ An understanding of Cunningham's view of scripture makes this statement all the more significant. When "we open the Bible," he argued, "we should feel that we are about to come into immediate contact with a Revelation of the Divine Mind," because the

¹⁴⁵A.C. Cheyne, "The Westminster Standards: A Century of Re-Appraisal," *RSCHS*, xiv. (1962), 203-4.

¹⁴⁶The Burgher Synod had effectively qualified its subscription requirements in 1797 by adding a preamble to its formula for admission which gave candidates for licence or ordination the freedom not to approve "compulsory measures in religion." *ibid.* Not long afterwards, the same concern induced the Anti-Burgher Synod to declare that they approved of "the power of the gospel not the sword of the civil magistrate" to bring people into the Church. *ibid.*, 204. Further, in 1820, the first Synod of the United Secession Church, over this same issue, relaxed their formula by asking "ordinands only to acknowledge that the Confession was 'expressive of the sense' in which they understood the Scriptures." I. Hamilton, "Confessional Subscription," *DSCHT*, 805.

¹⁴⁷Cheyne, "The Westminster Standards," 203.

¹⁴⁸*ibid.*, 204.

¹⁴⁹*ibid.*, 203.

¹⁵⁰Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxii.

Bible was “a communication from the great God who made heaven and earth....”¹⁵¹ Although authored by numerous individuals, the Spirit so superintended their work that the Bible was “in every respect...the transcript of the mind of the Spirit—an exact revelation of the will of God.”¹⁵² Specifically, he held that God’s inspiration of Scripture was exhaustive, extending to the selection of every word in the Bible. Cunningham had argued this point as early as 1827 in a student essay during the Apocrypha controversy (a dispute over the British and Foreign Bible Society’s circulation of Bibles containing the Apocrypha).¹⁵³ Accordingly, since he believed that the Bible is God’s Word in the literal sense of that term and “in the Standards of his Church he recognised the exact sense and full amount of Scripture,” to tamper with the Confession was to contradict the Word of God, from which the doctrine of the Church of Scotland ultimately derived.¹⁵⁴

Calvinistic orthodoxy in much of the Presbyterian Church in England and Ireland had already been seriously compromised. By 1830, for example, the majority of old Presbyterian congregations in England (descendants of the seceders at the restoration of Charles II) were Unitarian in creed, denying the Trinity and questioning the received teaching about atonement and hell.¹⁵⁵ The presbyterian Church in Ireland had also been greatly influenced by Unitarianism, and was facing incipient Arianism (the denial of the Son’s eternal coexistence with the Father).¹⁵⁶ At the time of the Row controversy, Cunningham may well have feared that loosening the terms of subscription to the Westminster Confession would have a similar result in Scotland.

¹⁵¹Cunningham, *Sermons*, 44, 55.

¹⁵²*ibid.*, 43.

¹⁵³Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xx. D. Bebbington has written that this “much higher view of biblical inspiration,” advocated by Cunningham, “originated with Robert Haldane” and came to prominence through the Apocrypha controversy. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 86-88.

¹⁵⁴Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxi.

¹⁵⁵O. Chadwick, *An Ecclesiastical History of England: The Victorian Church, Part I* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1966), 391-2.

¹⁵⁶Chadwick, *The Victorian Church, Part I*, 393; R. F. Holmes, *Henry Cooke* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1981), 21-24.

If the foundational doctrines of the Church were compromised, he believed, the message of salvation itself would be obscured. Cunningham argued that everything in the Bible was “revealed for...salvation,” and that Christ’s atoning death was “the most important...and fundamental” truth, “the foundation or centre of the whole scheme of salvation....”¹⁵⁷ “The death of Christ”, he said,

bore most materially, of any event that ever took place, upon the everlasting destinies of mankind, — it is the most important of all those things which concern our everlasting peace, —and therefore the knowledge and belief of it, must be of more consequence than the knowledge and belief of any, or all other truths.¹⁵⁸

Particularly jealous of speculation, according to Bonar, “when it appeared on the domain of Christian Doctrine,” Cunningham’s “test for it was instinctively: ‘Can it save?’”¹⁵⁹ Cunningham admitted that the new doctrines made it easy to obtain converts, but denied that these converts had been converted to the true gospel.¹⁶⁰ In a letter to John Bonar, he spoke of the “Campbellites” (after John McLeod Campbell) and the dangerous consequences of their preaching:

It is a most injurious perversion of the gospel. Some of the Campbellites, I understand, have the boldness to allege that Paul mis-stated the gospel to the jailor, when he said, ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved,’ in place of saying Believe that thou are pardoned, and be saved.’ They seem to be under no apprehension of the consequences that must inevitably attend the preaching of another gospel than Paul preached. Like other heretics, they seem waxing worse and worse.¹⁶¹

Cunningham’s concern for the authority and doctrine of the Church of Scotland help to make sense of the strong stand he took against Rowite ministers. His response can be appreciated more fully with an understanding of his view of the ministry. One

¹⁵⁷Cunningham, *Sermons*, 123.

¹⁵⁸*ibid.*, 127.

¹⁵⁹Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xvii.

¹⁶⁰Cunningham, *Sermons*, 306.

¹⁶¹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 17 November 1829 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 118-9).

of the reasons God established the Christian ministry, he believed, was to protect the Church from being “children tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine.”¹⁶² Because some in the Church are “easily led away from their former opinions by anything that wears the garb of novelty or which is addressed with some plausibility to any of their prejudices and prepossessions,” faithful Christian ministry is necessary to keep them from error and “lead them to walk in the paths of truth.”¹⁶³ It is crucial, therefore, for pastors to “speak the truth,” or to teach correct views of Christian doctrine, which lay “at the very foundation of all true religion” and “on which our salvation depends.”¹⁶⁴ Pastors must do more than speak the truth, however. They must also “speak the truth in love.”¹⁶⁵ In this way, he said, “their assertion and maintenance of the truth, even against its opposers, should never lead them into any violation of the great law of Christian charity and love.”¹⁶⁶ This does not mean, though, that speaking strongly against error is not important. “Sometimes our love to fellow-men,” Cunningham said, “and especially to those who have fallen into error...is best shown by pointing out the error, and by rebuking him who has committed it.”¹⁶⁷ The purpose of this is two-fold: first, that those in error might be restored to sound faith and practice. Ministers have in fact a “positive duty to wish well to them, and to do them good as we have opportunity....”¹⁶⁸ Secondly, it is hoped that those in possible danger of being led astray might be preserved from error. Cunningham, recognized the temptation in this to be motivated by false reasons, a temptation he must have sorely felt. Ministers, he wrote,

must especially beware of being seduced by the deceitfulness of our hearts into the indulgence of uncharitable feelings and language, —while all the time we may imagine that we are only zealous for the truth, —that we are honestly and impartially maintaining the interests of sound doctrine of

¹⁶²Cunningham, *Sermons*, 325.

¹⁶³*ibid.*, 326.

¹⁶⁴*ibid.*, 327.

¹⁶⁵*ibid.*, 328.

¹⁶⁶*ibid.*, 329.

¹⁶⁷*ibid.*

¹⁶⁸*ibid.*

true religion.¹⁶⁹

Though apparently gentle and compassionate in personal relationships, Cunningham, as when dealing with Lusk and Campbell, could indulge in “uncharitable feelings and language” in the midst of controversy.¹⁷⁰ Already developing as a controversialist, he later earned the accolade of gripping his antagonists like a bulldog.¹⁷¹ Inextricably associated with an able controversialist is the ability to think critically. His problem, however, as he developed a command for critical thinking, was the difficulty he had stifling the simultaneous development of a critical spirit. Sometimes, it seemed, when “exposing error,” Cunningham demonstrated more concern for the doctrine than the “heretic.” One later admirer, when defending Cunningham’s honesty, admitted that he “might be mistaken, especially about men, for he saw principles more clearly than persons.”¹⁷² Cunningham recognized this weakness in himself and his need for charity, but his great strength of critical thought coupled with his great weakness of a critical spirit would remain throughout most of his life.¹⁷³

It is also possible that Cunningham may have been seeking to promote himself through his role in the Rowite affair. His sermons and lectures, especially against the beliefs and practices of the Rowites, “drew the attention of the whole district, and

¹⁶⁹ibid., 330.

¹⁷⁰For examples of his personal character, see Rainy, *Cunningham*, 27-8, 48-50.

¹⁷¹J. Cunningham, *History*, ii, 514.

¹⁷²J. MacGregor, “Dr William Cunningham,” *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, xx (1871), 770.

¹⁷³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 32. In an article for the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, for example, in 1856, five years prior to his death, Cunningham wrote about his opponent, Sir William Hamilton: “We hope to be able to prove that this elaborate statement contains about as large an amount of inaccuracy as could well have been crammed into the space which it occupies; and, if we succeed in doing this, we may surely expect that Sir William’s authority upon theological subjects will henceforth stand at least as low as zero.” By the time the article was published, Hamilton had died. As would happen frequently throughout Cunningham’s life, he had to acknowledge the harshness of his words. In an editorial footnote, Cunningham wrote: “The knowledge, if we had possessed it, that he was to die so soon, would assuredly have modified somewhat the tone in which the discussion was conducted,—would have shut out something of its lightness and severity, and imparted to it more of solemnity and tenderness; and the knowledge which we did possess, that he, as well as ourselves, was liable every day to be called out of this world and summoned into God’s presence, *ought* to have produced this result.” Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation*, (Edinburgh, 1862; repr. Edmonton: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 111.

gave the young pastor a commanding position in his community.” Cunningham had by now developed a reputation as a “popular preacher.”¹⁷⁴ The phenomenon of the popular preacher, arising in Scotland in early nineteenth century, meant that Churches “prospered and preachers gained their fame on the basis of the appeal of the sermon.”¹⁷⁵ Primarily because of the breakdown of the parish system, the dramatic rise of the appeal of religious dissent, and the high import given to preaching within the church, people increasingly attended a particular Church, often outside their own parish, because they liked the preacher.¹⁷⁶ The popular preacher, therefore, was the preacher who commanded the attention of his hearers. An important part of the phenomenon of the popular preacher, writes the historian, W.G. Enright, was the “new awareness...that the individual preacher must articulate his sermon to the understanding and interest of his particular congregation.”¹⁷⁷ Cunningham appealed to both the understanding and interest of Middle Parish Church. To a congregation prepared by Scott to appreciate a theological argument, Cunningham delivered “profoundly logical and argumentative” sermons and lectures.¹⁷⁸ To a congregation

¹⁷⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 55. Cunningham was not an eloquent preacher like a Chalmers; nevertheless, he did achieve a level of popularity as a preacher during his time at Middle Parish Church.

¹⁷⁵Enright, “Preaching and Theology in Scotland in the Nineteenth Century,” 120.

¹⁷⁶The breakdown of the parish system was largely due to a rapidly shifting and growing population in the cities with which the church could not keep up. In 1801, for example the population of Glasgow was 77,385; in 1821 it was 147,043. Similarly, in Edinburgh during this same period, the population increased from 82,560 to 138,235. This twenty year period saw the net population of Scotland grow from 1,608,420 to 2,901,521. *ibid.*, 126. Between 1800 and 1823, the Church of Scotland added six chapels of ease; between 1797 and 1819, the two largest dissenting Presbyterian denominations, the Relief and United Secession, established one hundred and six new congregations. *ibid.*, 129, 132, 127-8, 120, footnote 1.

¹⁷⁷*ibid.*, 120, footnote 1.

¹⁷⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 55; Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxv; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 55. Although Cunningham addressed his sermons and lectures to the level of understanding of his congregation, he apparently adjusted the appeal of the sermon. Whereas Scott appealed to heart, mind, and imagination, Cunningham, by his own admittance, appealed primarily to the mind. In a letter to John Bonar, who was to preach at Middle Parish Church, Cunningham suggested that he bring some of his “most theological discourses containing a large portion of the exposition and application of doctrines because though Lusk objects also to me that I preached too much to the understanding yet now I believe a very considerable portion of the congregation have formed their taste very much from my preaching.” W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 10 December, 1833 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 146-7); Barr, “Introductory Memoir,” *Sermons*, by John Scott, xx.

in the middle of a crisis over the very definition of the gospel, Cunningham repeatedly addressed the peculiar doctrines of the Row controversy in order “to assuage an uneasy audience....”¹⁷⁹

Not only did the Rowite affair contribute to Cunningham’s popularity in the community, it also created a vacancy at Trinity College Church in Edinburgh, which he was offered. Members of this congregation had been praying for twelve to eighteen months for the “influences of the Spirit” when, during the first prayer of a service in May 1833, Thomas Carlyle (advocate for John McLeod Campbell), reportedly “gave a very loud stamp on the floor” and “in a very strong voice” cried out, “You have bound up my Spirit within you.”¹⁸⁰ After Carlyle added, “I will give thee the Spirit” and “I am the keeper of Israel,” a woman gave “a most dreadful shriek,” and some people left the Church, “apparently in haste.”¹⁸¹ Rather than stop Carlyle’s interruptions, as three elders requested, William Tait, minister of Trinity Church, declared, “Gentlemen, beware what you do; this is the voice of God.”¹⁸² Tait was consequently served with a libel and suspended from his duties, though he continued to preach. On 22 October 1833 the Edinburgh Presbytery deposed him from the ministry of the Church of Scotland.¹⁸³ Cunningham was offered the vacancy, which he immediately accepted, recording in his journal, “Write agreeing to accept the College Church.”¹⁸⁴

Thus the Rowite controversy greatly benefited Cunningham’s career, but there is no evidence that he actually sought this popularity or even the position in Edinburgh. His letters give no hint of this attitude; his later writings reveal that the theological issues of the controversy were indeed important to him; and his final sermon to

¹⁷⁹Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvii.

¹⁸⁰Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 1833-37, 18 May 1833 (SRO, CH2/121 21).

¹⁸¹*ibid.*

¹⁸²*ibid.*

¹⁸³*ibid.*, 28 August 1833, 11 September 1833, 30 October 1833.

¹⁸⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 59-60.

Middle Parish Church on 5 January 1834 specifically denies any such intent.¹⁸⁵

Referring to his move to Edinburgh, he stated:

I have taken the responsibility of that step, and must give an account of it at “the day of Christ.” But this I may say, that never since I was settled amongst you did I, if I know any thing of my own heart, entertain any desire whatever to leave my present situation, and that of course I never spoke one single word, nor took one single step, fitted or directed to the accomplishment of that object.¹⁸⁶

He stated further: “I have not been induced to accept of the call which I received, to occupy another station in the church, by any prospect of any superior happiness, but by what seemed to be an opportunity of contributing, to all human appearance, to the more extensive promotion of the interests of religion....”¹⁸⁷

William Cunningham bid his congregation at Middle Parish Church good-bye, having been appointed, at the age of twenty eight, to an Edinburgh charge, described by his biographer as “the summit of professional achievement.”¹⁸⁸ During his four years in Greenock, Cunningham achieved a level of success unusual for such a young man, earning the respect of his congregation and community, and attracting the attention of Churches seeking a minister. His success was due in part to his energetic parish ministry and the experienced pastoral advice of John Scott. But more directly responsible for Cunningham’s growing popularity was his emergence as a champion of Calvinistic orthodoxy at a time when that orthodoxy was being challenged and at the place where that challenge was the most conspicuous. The Rowite controversy provided Cunningham with a prominence he might otherwise not have enjoyed. Had he gone elsewhere, a small rural parish for instance, he may have remained unnoticed. Serving the Middle Parish Church, however, brought him recognition for his abilities, as he spoke out boldly in defense of Westminster Calvinism and equally as boldly,

¹⁸⁵This denial is, of course, to be expected, but in light of the circumstances, it seems sincere.

¹⁸⁶Cunningham, “Discourse on Philippians, II. 16, Preached in New Church, Greenock, on January 5th, 1834” (Edinburgh, 1834), 14.

¹⁸⁷*ibid.*, 16.

¹⁸⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 72.

sometimes even cruelly, against the Rowite doctrines and adherents. At the same time, Cunningham's involvement with the Rowite affair further committed him to the Westminster Confession of Faith. After taking strong stands against the Rowite doctrines in his sermons and lectures, giving evidence used in the deposition of John McLeod Campbell, and being instrumental in the removal of R.B. Lusk, Cunningham was no doubt more wedded to the doctrines of Westminster Calvinism than ever before.

3
THE “TEN YEARS’ CONFLICT” (1834-1843)
“I am not in the least afraid to engage in the controversy.”

I

Trinity College Church, founded in 1460 by Mary of Gueldres, Queen of James II, was the oldest collegiate Church in Edinburgh, predating St Giles by seven years.¹ Located next to the North Bridge in the valley between the High Street and Princes Street, it has been described as a valuable example of Gothic architecture, with a beautiful interior. It has also been “declared to be the worst Church to preach or hear in, in the City.”² Poor access plus cold and damp conditions rendered the College Church “miserable as a place of worship.”³ It was here on 19 January 1834 that Patrick Macfarlan, Evangelical minister of the West Parish in Greenock, introduced William Cunningham to a greatly depleted congregation.⁴ Disagreement with William Tait’s ministry had driven away many worshippers, while others had followed him to a new place of worship. Cunningham thus “found the church almost literally empty,” but his reputation quickly attracted a sizable following.⁵ An additional 320 seats were let during the year after his induction, and every seat with a view of the pulpit was occupied.⁶

¹A collegiate Church was an association of at least three secular clergy, joined together to perform specific ecclesiastical duties and to be in corporate ownership of certain revenues. D.E. Easson, “The Collegiate Churches of Scotland,” *RSCHS* 6 (1938), 195-6. Trinity College Church “was to support a provost, eight prebendaries (who were to receive a share of the revenues), two boys (also designated as choristers or clerks) and thirteen poor persons, known as “beidmen”, who were to be maintained in the Hospital.” N.M.M. Holmes, *Trinity College Church, Hospital and Apse* (Edinburgh: City of Edinburgh Museums and Art Galleries Publication, 1988), 3. Trinity College Church was located on the site of what is now Waverly Station. It ceased to be a collegiate charge in 1782 when the second stipend was transferred to New St Andrews Church, George Street.

²Notes on the History of Trinity College Church, 1898 (SRO, CH2/141/20), 13.

³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 75.

⁴Minute Book, Trinity College Church, 1830 to 1850, 19 January 1834 (SRO, CH2/141/14.).

⁵T. Chalmers, *On the Evils which the Established Church in Edinburgh has Already Suffered, and Suffers Still, in Virtue of the Seat-Letting Being in the Hands of the Magistrates* (Edinburgh, 1835), Appendix, 79; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 68.

⁶*State of the Edinburgh Churches: Tory Building Scheme* (Edinburgh, 1835), 9; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 68. Approximately one-sixth of the seats (120) did not provide a view of the minister. T. Chalmers, *On the Evils*, Appendix, 79.

Cunningham's first year in Edinburgh proved eventful in another way. On 14 July 1834 John Brown Patterson married him to Janet Denniston whom he had met while serving the Middle Church in Greenock.⁷ Janet was the daughter of John Denniston, a member of Cunningham's kirk session there and part of a family of "old commercial repute" in Greenock.⁸ She was described as a "servant of the book," and someone over whom "the sentiment of duty had the same commanding hold and noble mastery" that it had had over Cunningham's mother."⁹ Cunningham now entered, according to his biographer, what would be a period of extraordinary service, with "a young lady every way suitable for a helpmeet to him."¹⁰

As in Greenock, Cunningham pursued an active pastoral ministry in his new parish. He established week-day and Sabbath schools, increased the kirk session by eight elders, divided the parish into districts and appointed elders to each district, instituted regular visitation (requiring each elder to visit at least sixty families every six months), and employed a preacher as missionary to the parish, paying the salary from his own stipend.¹¹ Nonetheless, he proved unable to duplicate his previous success as a parish minister in Greenock, and Trinity College Church never "overflowed" with a large congregation. Even his biographer acknowledged that "Cunningham did not succeed as a preacher in Edinburgh."¹² Cunningham was not, however, as unsuccessful a preacher as some described him (one writer, for example, called him "one of the least popular in Edinburgh)."¹³ In November 1841, near the end of his time as minister of Trinity College Church, a letter appeared in the *Caledonian Mercury* recommending that Cunningham be considered to fill the vacancy at the Tolbooth Church. The writer, referring to Cunningham's "excellent

⁷Will and Testament of William Cunningham (SRO, SC.70/4/79).

⁸ibid.; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 72.

⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 72.

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹ibid., 73-5; Minute Book, Trinity College Church, 1830 to 1850, 6 October 1837, 5 October 1835, 21 September 1837.

¹²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 75.

¹³"Cunningham, Rev. William, D.D., LL.D.," *BDES*, 419.

pulpit performances and general efficiency as a clergyman,” called him “one of the most talented clergymen we have” and one whom the community “crowd to listen to...when it is known that his great acquirements are to be displayed elsewhere.”¹⁴

The argument that Cunningham failed totally as a preacher in Edinburgh may have been based on studies of seat rents, studies often fraught with problems as to interpretation. While it is true, for instance, that during Cunningham’s second year of ministry in Edinburgh, Trinity College Church lost half the seat rentals it had gained during his first year of ministry, the actual attendance reportedly remained virtually the same or slightly increased.¹⁵ In that year, 1835, the Town Council doubled the seat rent price at Trinity College Church, and many members stopped paying the rents altogether. It was believed that they continued to attend the Church or that others took their places without paying the rents.¹⁶ The number of communicants attending the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, while not providing total attendance figures, does indicate something of the steady size of the congregation during Cunningham’s pastorate. Between 1835 and 1843 there was little variation in the number of communicants—beginning with 227 in 1835, reaching a high of 263 in 1838 and 1839 and a low of 216 in 1843.¹⁷ Cunningham, then, did not do as poorly as some had said, taking size of congregation as the measure of success or failure. The congregation, almost nonexistent when Cunningham began, quickly reached a modest size during his first year and seemingly remained virtually the same size throughout the balance of his time of ministry.

¹⁴*Witness*, 17 November 1841.

¹⁵*State of the Edinburgh Churches: Tory Building Scheme*, 9. *The Scotsman*, on 18 March 1835, argued that the original increase of 320 seats rented had merely depleted nearby Church of Scotland congregations and that the 160 decrease a year later reflected a return of half of those same people to their original congregations. *State of the Edinburgh Churches*, 9-12; Chalmers, *On the Evils*, Appendix, 79. *Notes on the History of Trinity College Church* reports that the number of sittings let between 1834 and 1843 dropped from 475 to 60, but fails to report that the final number reflects the state of the church after the Disruption. *Notes on the History of Trinity College Church*, 14.

¹⁶Chalmers, *On the Evils*, Appendix, 79.

¹⁷Minute Book, Trinity College Church, 29 October 1835, 6 May 1838, 9 May 1839, 30 April 1843. The number of communicants for 1834 does not appear in the Minute Book.

Nevertheless, Cunningham did not achieve the success as a parish minister in Edinburgh that many, including the Town Council, had anticipated. Several explanations have been offered for this. It has been argued, for example, that his style was not imaginative enough for Edinburgh tastes.¹⁸ Another suggested that “the wealthier class were being gradually drawn to more convenient and fashionable Churches in the city” and that the substantial increase in the seat rent price in 1835 turned some away.¹⁹ Still another attributed his failure to the newly acquired habit of reading his sermons, something he had rarely done in Greenock.²⁰ Each of these suggestions contains an element of truth. Cunningham, it will be recalled, evidenced little imagination in his sermons — even John Bonar acknowledged that he “had no style as a Preacher;”²¹ Trinity College Church was so poorly situated that according to one observer it “rendered [Cunningham] almost inaccessible to the great portion of the community;”²² many seat-holders refused to comply with the unexpected doubling of the seat rents in 1835; and Hugh Miller, editor of the Evangelical newspaper, *Witness*, became exasperated with Cunningham’s reading of sermons, having seen the power in speeches he delivered from brief notes.²³ “Oh that Cunningham would preach a speech!” he once stated as he left Trinity College Church after hearing its minister.²⁴

¹⁸“Cunningham, Rev. William, D.D., LL.D,” *BDES*, 419.

¹⁹Notes on the History of Trinity College Church, 14.

²⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 75-6. For a general discussion against reading sermons in Edinburgh, see D.K. Guthrie and C.J. Guthrie, *Autobiography of Thomas Guthrie, D.D. and Memoir*, i (New York, 1874), 187-8, 190-1.

²¹Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, x.

²²*Witness*, 17 November 1841. Cunningham said about his church that “every adventitious circumstance as to locality, comfort, and accommodation, is most unfavourable.” Chalmers, *On the Evils*, Appendix, 79. For Cunningham’s comments on the extent of poverty in his parish, see W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 October 1837 (NCL, CHA 4.262.17).

²³Chalmers, *On the Evils*, Appendix, 34.

²⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 75. Miller may have intended more in this statement than the dissatisfaction he had with Cunningham’s reading of sermons. One of Cunningham’s future students, James Macgregor, stated that Cunningham closely read his theological lectures, yet delivered them with “fiery power.” Miller probably referred to a lack of intensity, which, while facilitated by reading, was not the necessary result. Macgregor, “Dr William Cunningham,” *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, xx (1871) 766-7.

These reasons provide a partial answer to the question of Cunningham's modest success, but one of Cunningham's future students, James Macgregor, probably best answered the query:

Partly, perhaps, because he had come to *think* that he was not, and could not be, a popular preacher. And mainly, perhaps, because, while conscientiously attending to pastoral work, his mind and heart, all through the period of his Edinburgh pastorate, were in very large measure drawn away into the main stream of that public movement in which his life became no unimportant part of the life-history of his Church and his nation."²⁵

Cunningham's own statements support Macgregor's two reasons. Years later, when he was asked to preach at the London Missionary Society's Annual Meeting, Cunningham declined the invitation, informing the society's representative that "it was entirely out of the question to suppose that *he* could preach—and if they wanted a Scotch preacher they must go to Candlish or to Guthrie—that all the world knew and were settled in the opinion that to ask *him* to preach on an occasion in which a great many people were to be interested, was absolutely ridiculous and absurd."²⁶ Near the end of his ten year period as a pastor in Edinburgh, Cunningham also gave credence to the second of Macgregor's reasons. Referring to the major controversy in which the Church of Scotland was involved in the nineteenth century, Cunningham stated:

We have struggled long enough for the retention of those rights and privileges...we have spent no small measure of time, and engaged in much unpleasant controversy,—our thoughts and attention have been distracted from the work of the ministry,—our studies have been interrupted, and our

²⁵Macgregor, "Dr William Cunningham," 767. For a helpful discussion of Cunningham's loss of confidence as a preacher, see D. Macleod, "Scotland's Greatest Theologian," *The Monthly Record of the Free Church of Scotland* (March 1990), 51-2. John Bonar agreed with the second of Macgregor's explanations: "Dr Cunningham soon exchanged pastoral duty for political conflict...." J.J. Bonar, "William Cunningham, D.D.," *Disruption Worthies*, 198. See also "Cunningham, William, D.D.," *Dictionary of National Biography*, xiii, 321.

²⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 384. Thomas Guthrie and Robert Candlish were two Evangelical Church of Scotland ministers who would soon rise to fame in the Non-intrusion controversy and would take prominent parts in the Free Church of Scotland.

pastoral labours interfered with....”²⁷

Indeed, during his ten years at Trinity College Church, Cunningham’s life was dominated by what has become known as the “Ten Years Conflict.”²⁸

II

When Cunningham arrived in Edinburgh in 1834, the Church of Scotland had, for nearly five years, been undergoing a serious challenge to its existence as an established Church. Beginning in April 1829 with a sermon by the United Secession Church minister, Andrew Marshall, a group of Scottish Dissenters had been aggressively agitating for the disestablishment of the national Church.²⁹ Religious establishments were unscriptural, unjust, inefficient, and unnecessary, argued Marshall, and only the voluntary gifts of a Church’s members should provide its resources.³⁰ Coming after the Test and Corporation Acts were repealed (and the political power of Dissent recognized) in 1828, Marshall’s call for disestablishment, unlike previous similar expressions, was received with great enthusiasm.³¹ Dozens of

²⁷*Witness*, 25 March 1843. It is worth noting in support of this point that none of Cunningham’s published sermons comes from his time at Trinity College Church. Cunningham probably repeated many of his Greenock sermons, and John Bonar either deemed his new ones unworthy of publication or did not have access to them.

²⁸The history and detail of the *Ten Years’ Conflict* is told here only so far as needed to make clear Cunningham’s role. For fuller descriptions see, S.J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); S.J. Brown and M. Fry, eds., *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993); A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843: The Age of the Moderates* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1973); D.A. Currie, “The Growth of Evangelicalism in the Church of Scotland, 1793-1843” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 1990); W.L. Mathieson, *Church and Reform in Scotland: A History from 1797 to 1843* (Glasgow, 1916); for a Moderate’s perspective, see J. Bryce, *Ten Years of the Church of Scotland 1833-1843* (Edinburgh, 1850); for a Middle Party perspective, see A. Turner, *The Scottish Secession of 1843* (Edinburgh, 1859); and for an Evangelical perspective see, R. Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict* (Glasgow, 1852).

²⁹Dissenters, Irish Catholics, and philosophic radicals in Ireland, and Dissenters and radicals in England, were waging similar campaigns against their respective established Churches at the same time. Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” 3-4.

³⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 88; Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 209.

³¹Brown, *Chalmers*, 220-1. In addition to the “triumphs of liberal political reform in the late 1820s and early 1830s” (including the repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts), S.J. Brown has suggested two other causes for the ready acceptance of Marshall’s message and the subsequent “eruption of aggressive Voluntarism:” the dramatic increase in religious Dissent since the mid-

pamphlets soon echoed Marshall's sentiments, public meetings presented his views to large audiences, and numerous political organizations were formed to sustain the Voluntary campaign he had initiated. On 13 September 1832 the Edinburgh Voluntary Church Association was formed. This was followed eight weeks later, on 12 November, by the start of the Glasgow Voluntary Church Association. It soon seemed to one Church of Scotland minister that "every town and village throughout Scotland had its Voluntary Church Association."³² These associations went to great lengths to prompt the Government to consider disestablishing the national Church. They held lectures on Voluntaryism, sent agitators to all parts of the country "to stir popular resentment against the Church," and through the newly founded monthly *Voluntary Church Magazine* (which "became the major organ of the Voluntary movement") "directed violent abuse against the Church of Scotland."³³ Never before, argues G.I.T. Machin, "had the Kirk met such vigorous opposition."³⁴

Once the Voluntaries began to form political associations, the Church of Scotland responded quickly, equaling their opponents in organizational strength and invective. Less than five months after the founding of the Edinburgh Voluntary Church Association, the Glasgow Society for Promoting the Interests of the Church of Scotland was constituted. Church defense associations were soon formed throughout Scotland. In March 1834 the Glasgow Society began publishing the monthly *Church of Scotland Magazine*, "matching in abusive language its rival *Voluntary Church Magazine*."³⁵ The conflict became increasingly bitter, ending friendships and tearing apart missionary and philanthropic societies formerly comprised of both Churchmen and Dissenters. "Active participants in the Voluntary controversy," according to S.J.

eighteenth century and the concern many dissenters had about the "Evangelical achievements in revitalizing the Church of Scotland." Brown, *Chalmers*, 221-2.

³²Brown, *Chalmers*, 221; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 88.

³³Brown, *Chalmers*, 221.

³⁴G.I.T. Machin, "The Disruption and British Politics, 1834-43," *SHR*, li (April 1972), 22.

³⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 222.

Brown, “tended to be younger men, with uncompromising idealism.”³⁶

Cunningham, only twenty-eight when he moved to Edinburgh, had been one of the founders of the *Church of Scotland Magazine* the previous year. Early in 1834, he and other Established Church ministers founded the Edinburgh Young Men’s Association for Promoting the Interests of the Church of Scotland. In an effort to “counter the thrusts of the Voluntary organizations,”³⁷ the Association first published and distributed 11,000 copies of a tract explaining the major facets of the establishment principle, but then decided that more people would be reached through a series of lectures.³⁸ On 7 November 1834, at St Andrews Church, Edinburgh, Cunningham gave the first in the series, acknowledging that while “the Church has many more able defenders,...I am not in the least afraid to engage in the controversy, and...I am by no means without the hope of doing something for promoting the cause of truth, and exposing the sophistries of our opponents.”³⁹ In his speech, Cunningham defended the right of establishment, describing a view of Church and State radically opposed to that of the Voluntary position.

One of the fundamental principles underlying Voluntary thought about the nature of the Church-State relationship was their conception of the kingdom of Christ as primarily spiritual. “My kingdom is not of this world,” was interpreted in such a way that restricted the Church’s activities to the spiritual realm, separating it completely from the material and political realms.⁴⁰ Voluntaries, moreover, often spoke “as if they identified the State, or civil authority, with the world, the evil world, which is subject to Satan, and necessarily at enmity with God.”⁴¹ Any established Church,

³⁶*ibid.*, 222-3.

³⁷A.B. Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy in the Church of Scotland, 1829-1843” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1953), 51-2.

³⁸*ibid.*, 51-4.

³⁹Cunningham, *Lecture on the Nature and Lawfulness of Union between Church and State* (Edinburgh, 1835), 2.

⁴⁰Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy,” 23, 80.

⁴¹Cunningham, *Union between Church and State*, 24; Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy,” 102.

therefore, was necessarily corrupt, its independence and purity in doubt because it used political means and accepted financial support from the public treasury.⁴²

In his lecture, Cunningham challenged their identification of the State with the evil world, noting that the State like the Church was instituted by God. And though he “willingly conceded that Christ’s Church, or Kingdom, is...purely spiritual” and “not of this world,” he did not believe this to be sufficient reason to conclude that there could be no lawful union between Church and State.⁴³ That conclusion could only be reached, he argued, “if it can be proved that union or connection between Church and State, of any kind, or in every degree, *necessarily* implies the headship over the Church of any other than Jesus Christ himself, the subtraction of any of the privileges conferred by Christ upon the office-bearers, or members of his Church, or the imposition of any restraint upon them, in the discharge of any of their duties.”⁴⁴ This, of course, would be difficult, if not impossible to prove. Cunningham, in contrast to the Voluntary position, then demonstrated the lawfulness of union between Church and State by presenting a Reformed view of that relationship. Calling upon the names of first and second generation Scottish Reformation leaders, John Knox, Andrew Melville, Alexander Henderson, George Gillespie, and Samuel Rutherford, as supporters of the establishment principle, he argued for a view like that of the second Book of Discipline.⁴⁵

The Church and State, both societies instituted by God, are, Cunningham argued, “two different provinces of his kingdom,” both belonging to the same “Master.” The State, therefore, “is as much bound to obey Christ as the Church.” Both the State and the Church, moreover, “are intended and fitted to serve ultimately the same great

⁴²Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy,” 114.

⁴³Cunningham, *Union between Church and State*, 11.

⁴⁴*ibid.*

⁴⁵*ibid.*, 19. The second Book of Discipline (1578) was a new statement by the General Assembly of its constitution, as it forsook the experiment of episcopacy introduced in 1572 at the Convention of Leith in favor of the Reformed principles of the first Book of Discipline (1560). J. Kirk, “Second Book of Discipline,” *DSCHT*, 755-6. See also J. Kirk, ed., *The Second Book of Discipline* (Edinburgh: The State Mutual Book and Periodical Service, 1980).

ends.”⁴⁶ Though the primary purpose of the Church is the “salvation of souls,” and that of the State the “welfare of the community,” both have as their overarching reason for existence the promotion of God’s glory.⁴⁷ Church and State should, accordingly, cooperate with each other to accomplish this one overarching goal, but exercise “reciprocal independence” as they do so. This preserves the right of Christ to reign as sole head of the Church and the right of office-bearers to manage its affairs.⁴⁸ Union is therefore not only lawful, but helpful, and even necessary.⁴⁹

After defending the establishment of the Church, Cunningham went on the offensive, warning of the consequences of Voluntarism. The Voluntary notion “of the unlawfulness of all union or connection between Church and State, implies, in fact, though not in intention ... the denial of Christ’s supremacy over the nations,— of his right to reign and to be regarded and obeyed as the supreme and the only Potentate.”⁵⁰ If adopted, he argued, this principle would exclude from public office all religious men, because they would be required to leave their religious views behind. There would, furthermore, “no longer be any attempt to subordinate national laws...to the authority of God’s word.” Sabbath laws would be repealed, national provision for education based upon religious principles would cease, “and the supplying of spiritual instruction to the many thousands of our countrymen, who are dying, and dying eternally, at our doors, would be left to the result of the tardy operation of raising pecuniary contributions from individual liberality.”⁵¹

⁴⁶Cunningham, *Union between Church and State*, 16, 31.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, 21. More particularly, the primary object of the State is to protect life and property and preserve peace and good order. See *ibid.*, 15.

⁴⁸*ibid.*, 6.

⁴⁹*ibid.*, 54. Though based more on principle than on the pragmatism of his essay for the Church Law Society in 1827, Cunningham argued the same basic position.

⁵⁰*ibid.*, 32.

⁵¹*ibid.*, 55-6. Consistent with his desire to see cooperation between Church and State, Cunningham supported Sir Andrew Agnew in his attempt to reform the laws regarding observance of the Sabbath. For Cunningham’s arguments in support of Sabbath legislation, see [Cunningham], *Presbyterian Review*, x (November 1837), 334-347. See also D. Macleod, “The Political Theology of the Disruption Theologians,” *Evangelical Quarterly*, lxvi (1994), 48-50; Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 28 June 1837, 3 August 1838, SRO, CH2/121/21-22.

Although Cunningham had carefully articulated a Reformed view of the relationship between Church and State, what made the most immediate impression on his opponents was not his argument but the strong language he employed in referring to the Voluntaries. He stated, for example, that “the friends of the Church...had determined to stem the tide of atheism, infidelity, popery, and Voluntaryism, and to resist the attacks made upon them by an apostate and perjured Secession.”⁵² The Voluntary response was immediate, frequent, and no less severe than Cunningham’s. In private conversation, in sermons and speeches, in letters, in print, and even in the House of Commons, Voluntary leaders claimed that Cunningham had stigmatized them as infidels.⁵³ One who attended the lecture, for example, fired back at Cunningham in a letter dated 22 November 1834:

You call Voluntary Churchmen Infidels, not because they deny the divine authority of the Scriptures, for this they do not, but because they deny the conclusions which you attempt to deduce from it. But if their [sic] be an awful malediction pronounced against him who shall deny or take away from the book of prophecy, there is one no less tremendous denounced against the man who shall impose his own fancies as the truths of God, and shall thus attempt to add unto the words of Scripture. Yes unto him ‘God shall add the plagues that are written in the book’ of Revelation.⁵⁴

While many Voluntaries were angered at being described as infidels, others were more sensitive to being designated “apostate and perjured.” One of these was John Ritchie, minister of the Secession Church in Potterrow, Edinburgh, and an outspoken leader of the Voluntaries. On the first Sunday after Cunningham’s lecture, Cunningham’s charge of “apostate and perjured Secession,” according to James Bonar, “furnished...Ritchie with a text...from which he harangued about 300

⁵²Cunningham, “Union of Voluntaries with Papists and Infidels,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (August 1835), 262. Strong language was common to both sides. Andrew Marshall, for instance, branded the Establishment as a “temple profaned by the admission of the uncircumcised and unclean.” Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 287.

⁵³Cunningham, “Union of Voluntaries with Papists and Infidels,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (August 1835), 262.

⁵⁴A Voluntary Layman, *Letter to the Rev. William Cunningham, College Church, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1834), 2.

people.”⁵⁵

Following the storm of criticism that Cunningham received, he disavowed the accusation that he had called the Voluntaries infidels but “promised publicly to make good the charge” of “apostate and perjured Secession.” After repeated challenges by Voluntaries to do so, Cunningham responded with six articles in the *Church of Scotland Magazine* between August, 1835 and February, 1836. In the first of these he acknowledged that his statement had “occasioned a considerable sensation, and...called forth a great deal of wrath and bitterness,” but he felt they had misrepresented him, since he had not called them infidel:

I applied no epithet whatever upon that occasion to the Voluntaries in general or to Voluntaryism. ... I referred simply to the notorious fact, that in the present day atheists, infidels, papists, and voluntaries are united together, or, at least, do in fact concur, in struggling to secure an object which seems to commend itself to the hearts of them all, viz. the overthrow of the Established Church.⁵⁶

Though he had not called Voluntaries infidels, he did accuse them of atheistic and thus infidel practices:

The whole Voluntary controversy depends upon the question of what are the duties of nations and their rulers, as such, to God and to his truth? Infidel and evangelical Voluntaries unite in maintaining, that nations and their rulers, as such, owe no duty to God and his truth, are under no obligation to assert and promote his cause,— a principle which has been often asserted and proved to be atheistical in its character; and if atheistical, then, *a fortiori*, infidel. Infidels, denying that there is any revelation of God’s will which justly challenges the belief and obedience of men, are of course quite consistent in denying that civil rulers are under any obligation to take God’s word as their guide. Evangelical Voluntaries, admitting the authority of God’s word as the standard of the opinions and conduct of men individually, deny that civil rulers as such, and in their public capacity, are bound to take it as the rule of their conduct — a principle which has the falsehood and guilt of infidelity, without its consistency in this matter.⁵⁷

⁵⁵James Bonar to [John] Bonar, 13 November 1834 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 69-70).

⁵⁶Cunningham, “Union of Voluntaries with Papists and Infidels,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (August 1835), 262-3.

⁵⁷*ibid.*, 266.

After clarifying this first accusation, Cunningham moved to the second charge, first explaining that he had applied the term “apostate and perjured” only to Voluntary Seceders and not to Voluntaries as a whole. The charge of “apostate” was warranted, he believed, because the change that had “taken place in the views of many Seceders in regard to National Establishments” was “a change for the worse, a grievous departure from the truth.”⁵⁸ The presbyterian secession churches, until about 1800, had held to the principle of a national Establishment and had professed a willingness to return to the Church of Scotland if purified of patronage. Only after 1800 did they begin to argue that the state connection necessarily corrupted a Church.⁵⁹ This was enough in Cunningham’s eyes to warrant the charge of apostasy.

Cunningham carefully distinguished his charge of apostasy from that of the more serious one of perjury. Voluntary Seceders, he argued, were guilty of perjury because “by their profession of Voluntaryism they are violating their own ordination vows.”⁶⁰ The Formula of the United Secession required approval “of the principles and design of the Secession.” Maintaining opposition to national Establishments, while assenting to this Formula, was not only inconsistent, but dishonest.⁶¹ Cunningham devoted most of the space in the six articles to justifying this foundation for his charge of perjury, demonstrating in a complex argument full of historical detail that even with recent modifications to the various Secession formulas of ordination, there was still inconsistency between their vows and Voluntaryism.

The major principles of the original Seceders (1733), Cunningham wrote, —agreement with the establishment principle, adoption of the standards of the Church

⁵⁸Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (September 1835), 302.

⁵⁹Brown, *Chalmers*, 221.

⁶⁰Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (September 1835), 301.

⁶¹Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (October 1835), 343. The United Secession Church, or the United Associate Synod of the Secession Church, was a union in 1820 of the Associate Synod and the General Associate Synod, the two New Light branches of the Secession which had seceded from the Church of Scotland in 1733. I. Hamilton, “United Secession Church,” *DSCHT*, 841.

of Scotland, and upholding the perpetual obligation of the covenants—were all contrary to a profession of Voluntaryism. Unlike the Voluntaries, the early Seceders considered themselves ministers of the Church of Scotland and intended to return to the Church once rid of patronage; they agreed with the role of the civil magistrate in religion as described in the Westminster Confession of Faith; they believed in the establishment of the Reformed faith as detailed in the National Covenant (1638); and they held to cooperation between Church and State as declared in the Solemn League and Covenant (1643).⁶² Changes, furthermore, in Burgher, Antiburgher, and United Secession ordination formulas were not enough to “open wide enough a door for the admission of Voluntaries.”⁶³ The Burgher and United Secession modifications in fact were intended “to provide a relief for the consciences not of Voluntaries, but of men who believed that the Confession of Faith sanctioned persecution by the civil magistrate.”⁶⁴ The remaining inconsistency, therefore, between ordination vows and Voluntary principles rendered Voluntary Seceders worthy of the charge of perjury. “Any inconsistency between profession and practice,” Cunningham concluded, “implies dishonesty, the more solemn the profession is, the more aggravated is the dishonesty; and if the profession be made, as in an ordination vow, virtually with the solemnity of an oath, then the inconsistency or dishonesty may be properly characterized by the name perjury.”⁶⁵

Cunningham demonstrated in these articles an ability to bring together a wealth of specific historical information and shape it into a rational argument. He also demonstrated the importance of defending character in an age when reputation meant

⁶²Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (December 1835), 443-53.

⁶³Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (October 1835), 343-9; Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (February 1836), 60-1.

⁶⁴Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (October 1835), 344-5; Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (November 1835), 373.

⁶⁵Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (February 1836), 67.

so much. In the first article Cunningham stated that one of the reasons Voluntaries claimed he had labeled them infidels was to:

excite a prejudice against me, by representing me as a rash and reckless person who was in the habit of making offensive charges against the character of his opponents, that were destitute of foundation or even of plausibility, and whose accusations therefore were entitled to no regard.⁶⁶

Cunningham's six-article justification of his accusations against the Voluntary Seceders (all the more significant given that Cunningham intensely disliked writing) suggests the importance he attached to shielding himself from the Voluntary assault on his character.⁶⁷ He showed, moreover, the extent to which he was committed to truth, which according to his biographer, "was a sacred *numen* [command] whose very skirts were holy."⁶⁸ Though many years later Cunningham acknowledged that in the excitement of debate he had inconsiderately and unwarrantably used the terms "apostasy" and "perjury," he always maintained that the Voluntary Seceders were inconsistent in holding to the principles of Voluntarism while in their ordination vows professing to uphold the principles of the Secession.⁶⁹

In mid 1832 the Edinburgh Voluntaries began what Henry Cockburn termed an

⁶⁶Cunningham, "Union of Voluntaries with Papists and Infidels," *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (August 1835), 262.

⁶⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 66.

⁶⁸*ibid.*, 93.

⁶⁹*ibid.*, 92-3. That the Seceders changed their opinion about the Establishment principle (the foundation for Cunningham's charge of apostasy) is an accepted part of the history of the Secession Churches. That there was inconsistency between Voluntarism and the United Secession vows of ordination (the foundation for Cunningham's charge of perjury) is a disputed point, but corroborated by the United Presbyterian theologian, John Cairns (1818-92). The "distinct and explicit condemnation of the principle of connexion between the Church and State," he wrote, "is not to be found" in First Secession, Burgher, Anti-Burgher, or United Secession records up through the onset of the Voluntary controversy. Moreover, the (New Light) Burghers merely disclaimed "compulsory, persecuting, and intolerant principles in religion," the (New Light) Antiburghers simply disavowed "conjuncts of Church and State" which subject "the State to the Church in civil matters, or the Church to the State" in religious matters, and the United Secession went no further than Burgher or Antiburgher statements. J. Cairns, *Memoir of John Brown, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1855) 170. For a different opinion, see Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 200-1: "The Burghers revised the formula to be accepted by ministers at ordination; the Anti-Burghers rewrote their Testimony. Both found, what the Secession fathers did not believe, that the civil magistrate was without authority in religious matters; both condemned the existing connection between Church and State. See also S. Isbell, "New Light," *DSCHT*, 625.

“Irish Anti-Tythe” campaign against the Annuity Tax, or Edinburgh church tax.⁷⁰

Dating back to the early seventeenth century, the Annuity Tax had produced a history of resistance “by whatever religious body happened to be in opposition to the Establishment.”⁷¹ The Voluntaries, no longer content to wage a mere war of words, began refusing to pay the tax, which to them seemed to be the “very essence” of what was objectionable with the establishment principle.⁷² In most Scottish burghs, income derived from seatrents provided the majority of funding for the stipends of the clergy of the Established Church. In Edinburgh, however, the Established clergy stipends were funded by income from the Annuity tax, a six per cent assessment on the annual rental of buildings in the burgh, collected from the occupants by the Magistrates. Voluntaries, claiming that all Establishments were necessarily corrupt, were no longer willing to support the Establishment ministers with their own money. In the summer of 1833, therefore, they held a series of meetings in Edinburgh in which they pledged to fill the jails rather than pay an unjust tax.⁷³

The agitation, which threatened the stipends of the Established clergy, escalated on 19 October 1837, when the prominent United Secession minister John Brown joined in the fray. At a meeting in Rose Street Church to form an association for the abolition of the Annuity tax, Brown “came forward and read a formal paper, in which he pledged himself to suffer any penalty, even to bonds and imprisonment,” rather than pay the tax again.⁷⁴ Brown had paid the tax since moving to Edinburgh in 1835, but he also published a protest in the Whig *Scotsman* newspaper of 2 January 1836.⁷⁵ His public change-of-heart provoked a series of eleven letters between 14 November 1837 and 18 March 1838 from the Baptist minister Robert Haldane to the Tory *Edinburgh Advertiser* (which had already dubbed Brown and his colleagues at the

⁷⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 229.

⁷¹Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 281.

⁷²Montgomery, “The Voluntary Controversy,” 182.

⁷³Brown, *Chalmers*, 229.

⁷⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 95.

⁷⁵Cairns, *Memoirs of John Brown*, 181.

meeting, “the Rev. revilers”).⁷⁶ Haldane expressed his outrage that someone with such an important position in the Church would take such dangerous action—Brown was not only minister of Broughton Place Church, one of the largest congregations in Edinburgh, but was also Professor of Exegetical Theology at the United Secession Synod Divinity Hall. To “resist a tax imposed by the Government under which you live,” Haldane wrote, “is to rebel against Christ, and in the end may kindle the flames of civil war.”⁷⁷

Though Haldane argued that “tribute of any kind, when lawfully demanded,” must be rendered, Brown distinguished between taxes for general and taxes for specific purposes.⁷⁸ Specific taxes, if for unscriptural purposes (like the Annuity tax), should be “passively resisted.” “For me voluntarily to pay such a tax,” he said, “would be to assist in doing what I believe God disapproves, and it would be an inversion of the inspired maxim,—‘to obey’ man ‘rather than God.’”⁷⁹ In a letter to the *Advertiser*, Brown claimed the example of “our covenanting ancestors” as support for his position, citing *The Hind Let Loose*, by Alexander Shields.⁸⁰ By the time Shields wrote *The Hind Let Loose*, however, he had sided with the more radical Covenanters, and his book represented the position of the small band of Cameronians.⁸¹ Cunningham, not willing for Brown to claim the Cameronians as “our covenanting ancestors,” wrote a letter to the *Advertiser* on 24 November 1837. The book, he argued, distinctly testified against the majority of Covenanters of that time who paid the taxes which the Cameronians refused to pay. *The Hind Let Loose*, “then not only does not prove that ‘our covenanting ancestors’ refused, for conscience sake, to pay taxes imposed upon them by law; but, with respect to the generality of them, it proves

⁷⁶ *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 27 October 1837.

⁷⁷ Cairns, *Memoirs of John Brown*, 184-5.

⁷⁸ A. Haldane, *The Lives of Robert and James Haldane*, 3rd edn (London, 1853; repr. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, n.d.) 609.

⁷⁹ Cairns, *Memoirs of John Brown*, 181.

⁸⁰ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 96.

⁸¹ S. Isbell, “Alexander Shields,” *DSCHT*, 772-3.

the very reverse.”⁸² Cunningham then took up the general question being debated between Brown and Haldane:

Indeed there is no way of escaping from the express precepts of Scripture about paying taxes, except by proving *that they are not due*, and the only ground on which this can be maintained, with any thing like plausibility, is that...the Government which enacts or sanctions them is not a lawful Government, and should not have the Scriptural principles about subjection and obedience as a Christian duty applied to it at all.⁸³

Cunningham concluded his letter by calling upon the United Secession Synod to declare its approval of Brown’s views about the Annuity Tax or “to deprive him of his office.”⁸⁴

Only days after Cunningham’s letter appeared in the *Advertiser*, friends of Brown began to circulate a pamphlet containing documents written by Brown on the Annuity Tax. In one of the addenda, Brown referred to Cunningham’s letter:

As to the communication in the *Edinburgh Advertiser* from the Minister of the College Church—when Dr. Brown recollects the relation which once subsisted between the grateful pupil and his self-chosen instructor, all the feelings of a severe kind, which it is fitted to excite are lost in PITY. ‘ET TU BRUTE!’ DIXI.⁸⁵

Cunningham’s reputation was again at stake. On 5 December 1837 Cunningham responded with another letter to the *Advertiser*. It “was much easier,” he wrote, “for Dr. B. to insinuate against me a charge of ingratitude than to answer my letter.”⁸⁶ Since Brown implied that their relationship obligated Cunningham in some way, “the grateful pupil” felt it necessary to specify the exact nature of that relationship. For two or three years, Cunningham wrote, he had occasionally attended Brown’s church;

⁸²*Edinburgh Advertiser*, 28 November 1837.

⁸³*ibid.*

⁸⁴*ibid.*

⁸⁵*ibid.*, 8 December 1837.

⁸⁶*ibid.*

during two College sessions he had attended Brown's New Testament class; he had eaten breakfast with him on three occasions and called at his house six or eight times. "I have," Cunningham wrote, "derived from my intercourse with him, much pleasure and some instruction, and I shall ever most willingly acknowledge that, on these grounds, I am under some obligation to him."⁸⁷

That relationship soured, however, during the Apocrypha controversy, when Cunningham "differed most decidedly" from Brown. "Intimacy with him after that," Cunningham wrote, "was out of the question, because it was impossible for me any longer to respect him." "About three years ago," moreover, "Dr. Brown, for reasons which I can only conjecture, thought proper to cut me when, as usual, I bowed to him on the street. I bowed to him a second time, and was cut again." This behavior Cunningham regarded as setting him "free from restraint" and allowing him to treat Brown as a stranger:

Dr. B. has now become the public advocate of principles which tend not merely to the subversion of the Established Church, but the order of civil society. He has attempted to defend his principles and his conduct in a manner which is highly discreditable, and I shall not be deterred by any thing he may say or insinuate from taking a part in exposing them as they deserve.⁸⁸

Five days after this letter appeared in the *Advertiser*, Brown wrote to the newspaper acknowledging that Cunningham had endeavored, "not without success," to distance himself from reproach based on obligation to their relationship. He also gave the reason for "cutting" Cunningham (without acknowledging that he had actually done so)—"by something more than implication," Cunningham had called him "a perjured apostate."⁸⁹ This was an apparent reference to Cunningham's mention of Brown in one of the articles he had written for the *Church of Scotland*

⁸⁷ibid.

⁸⁸ibid.

⁸⁹ibid., 15 December 1837.

Magazine, in which he attempted to justify his use of the term “apostate and perjured Secession.”⁹⁰ Brown then concluded his letter:

The temptation is strong, or at any rate the provocation is great, but I must not ‘render railing for railing’ —if it were for no other reason than that which has been assigned for Michael the Archangel not bringing a railing accusation ‘against the Devil’ when he disputed about the body of Moses,—that in such a combat I would be sure to come off at the worse. But there is a better reason. The Master has forbidden it.⁹¹

For a while it looked as though Brown would have the last word. Brown, however, provoked another response from Cunningham, with Brown’s 600-page publication, *The Law of Christ Respecting Civil Disobedience*.⁹² In the October 1839 issue of *Presbyterian Review*, Cunningham reminded Brown of the inconsistency between his profession of Voluntaryism and his ordination vow, and after a lengthy *ad hominem* argument, he attacked the credibility of Brown’s numerous sources:

One great object of his book has evidently been, to invest Voluntaryism with something like respectability, by producing all the eminent names which had sanctioned it, or any thing like it; and as in aiming at this object, he has been restrained by no regard to fairness or candour, it was the more necessary to show, by the explanations that have now been given of the true state of the question, and of the real views of Churchmen, that a large proportion of his quotations, while they may still serve the object of showing that he is a man of some reading, are utterly misapplied when brought forward as testimonies in favour of Voluntaryism.⁹³

Cunningham not only challenged Brown’s sources, but argued that the supporters of Voluntary beliefs throughout history—the “ferocious fanatics,” the early German Anabaptists, the Donatists, and some Roman Catholics and Socinians—were ranged against “the whole body of Reformers” as those who supported the Establishment

⁹⁰Cunningham, “Apostasy and Perjury of Voluntary Seceders,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (November 1835), 377.

⁹¹*Edinburgh Advertiser*, 15 December 1837.

⁹²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 97; Cairns, *Memoir of John Brown*, 186, 189; [Cunningham], “Civil Disobedience,” *Presbyterian Review*, xii (October 1839), 288.

⁹³[Cunningham], “Civil Disobedience,” *Presbyterian Review*, xii (October 1839) 291, 307.

principle.⁹⁴ Cunningham thus got in the last word between the two men in this prolonged and bitter skirmish, attacking Brown's character, challenging his credibility as a historian, and claiming the testimony of the Reformers.⁹⁵ Like the Voluntary controversy as a whole, it had been a battle of harsh words. In the process, Cunningham had felt it necessary to defend his reputation, his stipend (by defending the Annuity), and the establishment principle.

III

The challenge of radical Voluntaryism had placed the Established Church in the uncomfortable position of defending its relationship with the State. It had also, admitted one unnamed Church of Scotland minister, prompted the Church to wake up from its ecclesiastical "slumber" and to take inventory of its current condition: "the dust and rubbish have been cleared away,—the foundations inspected, the sound parts ascertained, the corrupt parts marked."⁹⁶ One of the "corrupt parts," said the Voluntaries, was patronage. Efforts to revive the opposition to patronage had already begun after 1820, encouraged by the growing strength of Evangelicalism. Only in about 1831, however, did the anti-patronage campaign begin to gain widespread support. Anti-patronage societies formed throughout Scotland; anti-patronage petitions flooded Parliament; presbyteries, synods, and even the public press began to debate the issue. The increased agitation for the abolition of patronage should be partly attributed to the Whig political campaign for Parliamentary reform which culminated in the reform bill of 1832.⁹⁷ As one Evangelical historian of this period

⁹⁴*ibid.*, 307, 311. Anabaptists, known as radicals or the left wing of the Reformation, held to the separation of Church and State; Donatism, an African separatist Church movement founded in the fourth century, rejected state and society; Socinianism, a rationalist movement that grew from the thought of Lelio Sozzini (1525-62), also held to the separation of Church and State.

⁹⁵Cunningham would later apologize to Brown for his conduct in the Voluntary controversy at the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in London in 1846. See chapter four.

⁹⁶*First Report of the Edinburgh Young Men's Church Association, with the Speeches, Delivered at the Annual Meeting* (Edinburgh, 1835) 31.

⁹⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 223-4.

later remarked, the recent attainment by many of the right to participate in the selection of their national representatives made it inevitable that they would desire that same right with respect to their parish minister.⁹⁸ Perhaps a more important cause, however, was the Voluntary claim that patronage exposed the compromised nature of the Church of Scotland. Voluntaries frequently pointed out that the male heads of families elected the ministers in their congregations, while a local landlord or a Crown official appointed them in the Established Church. As a result, more and more Churchmen, both Moderates and Evangelicals, became convinced that some level of reform was needed to provide a greater popular voice in the selection of ministers.⁹⁹

Cunningham, it will be recalled, had in his address of 1827 to the Church Law Society, approved of lay patronage as long as the Church had the final right to determine the suitability of a nominee for the particular charge to which he was appointed. The Parliamentary Act of 1690 abolishing patronage had placed this right in the hands of the presbytery. Congregations were entitled to object to a nominee, but the presbytery decided if the objections were valid. These rights of congregations and presbyteries were not explicitly denied in the Act of 1712 restoring patronage.¹⁰⁰ Early in 1832, Cunningham attempted to force a test case on this principle, of the final right of presbyteries, to come before the General Assembly, by “strongly” encouraging a member of the presbytery of Dunbarton not to translate the patron’s nominee to the parish church of Row. “If it come before the Assembly in that shape,” he wrote to John Bonar, “it will be the most important business before it.”¹⁰¹ Cunningham’s views on patronage were in a state of flux at that time, and he was reticent to endorse some of the anti-patronage efforts, especially the Anti-Patronage Society. He did, however, inform Bonar on 22 February 1833 that he had no

⁹⁸R. Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict*, new edn, i (Glasgow, 1863), 193.

⁹⁹Brown, *Chalmers*, 224.

¹⁰⁰Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, 223.

¹⁰¹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 12 April 1832 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 130-1).

objection to pursuing every constitutional means to have the Act of 1712 repealed. And if given only two choices—popular election (by those in communion with the Church) and the existing system—he would choose the former. But he was not willing to posit that popular election was necessarily the best system, it being neither required by Scripture nor by the Westminster Confession.¹⁰² “At the same time,” he acknowledged, “I have been of late rather coming round to popular antipatronage views....”¹⁰³

Meanwhile, popular anti-patronage agitation had continued, and the General Assembly of 1832, after receiving eleven overtures from presbyteries and synods, debated the issue for the first time in nearly fifty years. The measures recommended in the overtures ranged from calls for the immediate replacement of patronage with a form of popular election of ministers to more moderate suggestions that the Assembly simply consider alternatives which would provide parishioners with more influence over the patron’s presentation. Although the Assembly decided by a vote of 127 to 85 not to adopt the measures recommended in the overtures, the vote was sufficiently close to promote additional efforts. Anti-patronage agitation grew so intense by early 1833 that the Assembly received instructions from the Whig Government demanding that it reform the patronage system. In mid-May, a few days before the opening of the 1833 Assembly, the Evangelical party leadership met privately and decided not to attempt to abolish patronage. Instead, they would make a motion in the Assembly to pass a new act of Church law giving the majority of communicant male heads of family in a parish the right to veto an unpopular presentation, with or without submitting reasons to the presbytery.¹⁰⁴

On 23 May 1833 Thomas Chalmers introduced the motion in the Assembly, and George Cook, Professor of Church History at St Andrews University, made the

¹⁰²W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 22 February 1833 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 134-5).

¹⁰³*ibid.*

¹⁰⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 225-7.

counter motion. Cook's motion departed from Chalmers's in that it required reasoned objections from the congregation and retained the final decision in the presbytery.¹⁰⁵ These motions were followed by speeches for and against, including, near the end of the debate, that of Cunningham, whose biographer recorded the event:

Early in the day, the debate began, and continued till the evening was wearing late. The house was thin. Members who wished to slink away and shun the vote had left. Many who meant to vote, had gone out for a breath of cool air. The debate was at that languishing state when all the arguments have been used up, and the threshed straw is threshed over again. A tall young man with an immense curly head arose, under the gallery beside a pillar, and began to speak. 'Who is that?' ran in loud whispers about the house, and the answer was not at once forthcoming—'Cunningham of Greenock.' The attention of the house was roused in a moment. The loungers in the Parliament Square crowded back to their places.¹⁰⁶

Cunningham evidently delivered the speech extemporaneously, but it favorably impressed more than one attender at the Assembly. The *Presbyterian Review* asked him to write his speech out in full; John Learmonth of Dean, Lord Provost of the City of Edinburgh, attending the Assembly as an elder, decided to offer Cunningham the next vacancy in Edinburgh; and one Moderate minister said to George Cook "that's Andrew come back," referring to Andrew Thomson and his ability in debate against the Moderates.¹⁰⁷

Cunningham argued before the Assembly that the congregational veto would not infringe on the rights of patrons as provided in the Act of 1712, because that right was merely one of nomination. It would, however, restrain the patron in the exercise of that right by limiting the number of licentiates from which he could choose to those he felt the people would accept. This, he said, was the main benefit of Chalmers's motion.¹⁰⁸ Cunningham also expressed his "delight with the great concession" in Cook's motion that gave presbyteries the final right to judge not only general

¹⁰⁵ *Acts of Assembly 1813-1833, Abridgement* (Edinburgh, 1833), 45-6.

¹⁰⁶ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 65-6.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, 66-7.

¹⁰⁸ "Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, iv (September 1833), 297-8.

qualifications but also the suitability of a presentee for a particular charge.¹⁰⁹

Cunningham, it will be recalled, had put forth this view in his paper for the *Church Law Society* in 1827. Because this principle had been “almost wholly overlooked in practice,” however, and ministers had been intruded upon congregations by patrons against the congregation’s consent, Cunningham now argued that more was needed than Cook’s motion offered.¹¹⁰ Cook’s motion, moreover, did not recognize the rights of the congregation to a sufficient extent. He therefore preferred Chalmers’s motion and called upon the Church “to restore and to secure to the people of Scotland all those rights which her constitution has conferred upon them, and especially the great right of preventing any man from being intruded upon them as their minister against their consent.” This “great principle of non-intrusion,” which “has been a fundamental principle in our ecclesiastical constitution, asserted in the Second Book of Discipline, and declared by the act of Assembly in 1736,” he stated, “necessarily...implies that the people must have a veto upon the nomination of their minister.”¹¹¹ In spite of this and many other speeches in favor of the veto, the Evangelicals lost the motion by a vote of 137 to 149.

Another issue of particular importance debated that year in the Assembly was the status of ministers of chapels of ease. During the twenty year period between 1801 and 1821 the population of Scotland had nearly doubled, giving rise to the need for new Churches to minister to the growing population. By 1833 forty Churches had been erected (and endowed) in the Highlands and Islands under the Parliamentary Act of 1824; forty-two Churches, known as chapels of ease, also had been erected (though not endowed), mostly in the Central Lowlands, under the Assembly Act of 1798.¹¹² Neither the parliamentary Churches nor the chapels of ease had their own parishes,

¹⁰⁹ibid., 299.

¹¹⁰ibid.

¹¹¹ibid., 300.

¹¹²Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, 224; Cheyne, *The Ten Years' Conflict & The Disruption: An Overview* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1993), 2.

and their ministers had no seat in the Church Courts. The Assembly of 1833 passed a Declaratory Act giving the ministers of the Parliamentary Churches full rights in the Church courts and establishing *quoad sacra* parishes (as opposed to *quoad civilia* parishes, which were defined by the civil law) for their ministries.

The Evangelicals, desiring these same rights for ministers serving the chapels of ease, made a motion to that effect. In support of the motion, Cunningham, reportedly, “made a grand appearance,” when he responded to the Procurator’s reluctance to support the motion.¹¹³ The *Edinburgh Instructor* recorded Cunningham’s words which were punctuated with “hear, hear” and laughter:

The Procurator says that...[the] motion contains statements on which his mind is not made up. Now what are the statements in that motion? The motion says that by the constitution of this church there is but one order of pastors possessed of equal power and authority. Does any man dispute that? —then it holds that according to the constitution of our church, ministers of chapels of ease ought to be admitted to all the privileges of the regular clergy of our church. Does any man dispute that? Well, then, these are all the great and *abstruse* points in...[the] motion.¹¹⁴

In the end another motion by Cook (who had previously voiced his doubts as to the Church’s authority to raise these unendowed churches to the same level as those which were endowed) to appoint a committee “to increase the comfort and usefulness of ministers of chapels of ease,” won the day, but Cunningham had again left his mark, demonstrating his ability to focus on the key aspects of an argument and to do so with effective use of sarcasm.¹¹⁵

Though the Evangelicals lost both this motion and the one in favor of a veto, their growing strength and boldness were clearly demonstrated at the Assembly of 1833. At the conclusion of his speech in support of the veto, Cunningham warned the Moderates in the Assembly that:

¹¹³W. Bonar to J. Bonar, 21 May 1833 (NLS, MS 15998 fols. 42-3).

¹¹⁴“Ecclesiastical Intelligence,” *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxxii (June 1833), 438.

¹¹⁵*ibid.*, 435.

This right cannot be much longer withheld, and it would be well if this house would learn from what is passing around them. Last year we came to this house asking merely for a committee to investigate the subject, but this was refused; we have come up this year in far greater numbers, and making a much larger demand; and if you refuse this, I trust that many will come up next year, who may ask still more, and ask it in a way which will compel you to grant it.¹¹⁶

During the next year, Cunningham attempted to make good his threat. In January 1834, the *Presbyterian Review* carried an article by Cunningham, entitled, "Hints towards the Formation of the next General Assembly," the main thrust of which was to encourage Evangelicals to "manage" the election of elders for the next General Assembly. The Moderates, he observed, anxious to regain their prominence in the General Assembly, were rumored to be instructing the presbyteries in which they comprised the majority to elect only Moderate elders to the Assembly, disregarding the rotation system if necessary. If this were the case, wrote Cunningham, then Evangelicals should also employ these tactics and engage in "open and avowed warfare" with the Moderates. If the Evangelicals, he argued, had done so prior to the 1833 Assembly, Chalmers's motion would have passed, since at least ten of the presbyteries which overtured the Assembly to reform patronage had returned elders who voted for Cook's motion. In order to provide information by which the Evangelicals could judge the strength of the two parties and thereby exercise "prudence and foresight" in the election of elders to the Assembly, Cunningham analyzed each presbytery, listing "right men" (Evangelicals) and "wrong men" (Moderates).¹¹⁷ Cunningham concluded the article by writing that he would "rejoice to see a motion similar to that made by Dr. Chalmers in the last Assembly carried in

¹¹⁶ibid., 303.

¹¹⁷His summation of the evidence is noteworthy: "Of the *sixteen* synods in the church, the moderate party have a majority in all but *four*; of the *seventy-nine* presbyteries, *twenty-four* are right, *forty-seven* are wrong, and the two parties are equal in *eight*; of the *nine hundred and forty-five* ministers, *five hundred and twenty-nine* are wrong, *three hundred and eighty-eight* are right, *nineteen* are doubtful, meaning thereby, that sometimes they vote one way and sometimes another; and there are *nine* vacant parishes." [Cunningham], "Hints towards the Formation of the next General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, iv (January 1834), 574.

the next, for it would go far to satisfy the Christian people of Scotland, that their ecclesiastical guides were not indifferent to their rights and privileges,” but that ultimately this motion was not enough. “Patronage,” he stated, “must be abolished.”¹¹⁸

Most Evangelicals at this stage would have been content with something less than the abolition of patronage.¹¹⁹ Cunningham, however, began a vocal if not vociferous campaign to abolish patronage completely and to elevate the status of chapel ministers. In the Edinburgh presbytery, for example, even Evangelicals became “a little gated to find Cunningham so resolute upon discussing both Patronage and the Chapels of Ease.”¹²⁰ On 1 May 1834 the Evangelical, Horatius Bonar, wrote to John Bonar about the presbytery’s discussion of patronage the previous day. Cunningham, he wrote,

made a most capital appearance. His speech was most powerful, but tremendously severe. He struck right & left; first the moderates whose long continued system, of ‘baseness & hypocrisy’ as he called it, he denounced most unmercifully. Then the ‘cowardly & chicken hearted Evangelicals’ came in for their share.¹²¹

The next day Cunningham moved that the presbytery overture the General Assembly to immediately raise the “Ministers of Chapels of Ease to the full exercise of all the ecclesiastical rights and privileges of other ordained Pastors of Congregations, leaving it to the wisdom of the General Assembly to use all the means in their power to obtain the desirable object of an endowment without making this a necessary prelude to the extending an immediate act of justice to these Chapel Ministers.”¹²² On 13 May 1834 he supported a similar motion in the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale, basing his

¹¹⁸ibid., 555-577.

¹¹⁹Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” 24.

¹²⁰James Bonar to John Bonar, [August to November 1834] (NLS 15997, fols. 65-6).

¹²¹Horatius Bonar to John Bonar, 1 May 1834 (NLS 15997, fols. 158-9).

¹²²Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 1 May 1834 (SRO, CH2/121/21).

argument on the presbyterian doctrine of the parity of elders.¹²³ All elders, because of their essential equality, are entitled to the same rights and privileges in Church government. Cunningham apparently argued this point so frequently that he earned for himself the title “the great advocate of Presbyterian parity” by a disgruntled Moderate minister.¹²⁴

On the same day Cunningham moved in the synod to overture the General Assembly to petition Parliament to repeal the Act of 1712 which had reestablished patronage in the Church of Scotland. Cunningham, stated the *Instructor*, opposed patronage because it was contrary to “the word of God,” “right reason,” and “sound principle.”¹²⁵ The veto was a step in the right direction, he said, because it protected a parish from having someone thrust upon it against the consent of the people. But only the abolition of patronage would ensure what he now believed crucial—that no one other than members in the Church should have any role in the election of their minister.¹²⁶ William Bonar wrote to John Bonar on 15 May 1834 that “you will be astonished to see how Cunningham has succeeded in the Synod.”¹²⁷ Cunningham’s motion to overture the 1834 Assembly was in fact carried by a vote of nineteen to fifteen, much to his and other people’s surprise.¹²⁸

The 1834 General Assembly decided not to seek the abolition of patronage, but, writes S.J. Brown, “the Evangelical party finally wrested control of the Church from the Moderates and passed the three acts which would shape Church policy during the next troubled decade.”¹²⁹ First, by a vote of 180 to 131, the Assembly passed the

¹²³“Religious Intelligence,” *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxxiii (May 1834), 346.

¹²⁴J. Macfarlane, *The Late Secession from the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh and London, 1846), 38.

¹²⁵“Religious Intelligence,” *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxiii (May 1834), 346.

¹²⁶*ibid.*

¹²⁷W. Bonar to J. Bonar, 15 May 1834 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. [54-5]).

¹²⁸*ibid.*

¹²⁹Brown, *Chalmers*, 233. A Moderate, later writing for the *Church Review*, offered his own reasons for the Evangelical takeover in the Assembly. The proximate cause, he wrote, was the reform bill, but another significant cause was the effort Evangelicals made to befriend ministerial students. Moderates, moreover, were careless about nominating ministers and elders for the General Assembly, sometimes nominating those they knew would not attend, sometimes nominating men who declined,

Veto Act, restraining presbyteries from proceeding to ordination if the majority of communicating male heads of family voted against the patron's presentation.¹³⁰

Second, by a vote of 152 to 103, the Assembly passed the Chapels Act, assigning to the chapels of ease clearly demarcated parish areas, directing that government of the churches be by kirk session, and entitling their ministers to sit in all Church courts.¹³¹

Thirdly, the Assembly instructed its Church Accommodation Committee, appointed in 1828, to raise funds within the Church for new-Church construction in the Lowlands, and it formed the Church Endowments Committee to seek a Parliamentary grant to endow those Churches.¹³² In addition to these three Evangelical initiatives, the 1834 General Assembly responded to overtures calling for eldership reform by appointing a committee with the Evangelical lawyer Alexander Dunlop as convener to report on the question.

Although Cunningham had not been a member of the momentous 1834 Assembly, he immediately became involved implementing the four Evangelical reform measures. In addition to working on behalf of the Veto Act at the presbytery level, Cunningham responded in the Evangelical *Presbyterian Review* to a pamphlet by George Cook. Cook sought a delay of the implementation of the Act, arguing that it was beyond the authority of the Church to enact the law.¹³³ Cunningham, citing the first and second Books of Discipline, various acts of Assembly, and M'Crie's *Life of Melville* as support for the Act, urged the Evangelicals "to secure that which is now

allowing an opponent to take their place. "During the time of Assembly, too," he continued, "the Moderates make engagements, which, for three or four hours every day, leave their benches empty. Be it observed, that all this goes on merely on one side; the Wild party bear no empty guns; all their Presbyteries are fully represented; they accept of no invitations to dinner or supper parties; they muster at the first call of the roll, and till the last hour of the last day, their benches are packed, morning, noon, and night." "Present State of Parties in the Church of Scotland," *Church Review*, i (November 1836), 452-4.

¹³⁰Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 290.

¹³¹J. Cunningham, *Church History of Scotland*, ii, 464; Cheyne, *Ten Years' Conflict*, 2.

¹³²Brown, *Chalmers*, 234, 213, 235.

¹³³Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 25 February 1835 (SRO, CH2/121/21). Cunningham was appointed to a committee "to consider and report on the proposed regulations for carrying into effect the Act passed by last Assembly."

within their grasp as speedily as possible” and reminded them that “the Christian people of Scotland were originally deprived of the power of resisting an unsuitable pastor, not by the civil but by the ecclesiastical courts. Why should it not be restored in the same way?”¹³⁴

Motivated by a belief in the parity of elders and, no doubt, by the desire to consolidate the Evangelical ascendancy by adding the mostly Evangelical chapel ministers to the Church courts, Cunningham also actively implemented the Chapels Act in his presbytery and synod.¹³⁵ On 25 June 1834, in the Edinburgh Presbytery, his motion to receive the chapel ministers under the terms of the last Assembly was carried unanimously.¹³⁶ The presbytery, moreover, appointed Cunningham Convener of the Committee on Chapels. Its primary responsibilities were to examine the constitutions of the chapels for inconsistencies with the laws of the Church and to assign districts to the chapels to be erected into *quoad sacra* parishes by dividing up existing parishes.¹³⁷

Cunningham also served on presbytery committees to implement the directives of the Church Accommodations Committee and spoke on their behalf at the synod.¹³⁸ Moreover, he supported the aims of the Church Endowments Committee. Its negotiations with Government for endowments, however, soon met with vigorous opposition from Voluntaries, who accused the Church of Scotland of “party politics.” The *Scotsman*, which advocated the Voluntary position, labeled the attempt, a “Tory Church Building Scheme,” and the Scottish Central Board for Extending the

¹³⁴Cunningham, “Dr. Cook on the Overture Concerning Calls,” *Presbyterian Review*, vi (November 1834), 95-6, 102. Cunningham was probably referring to the Moderate’s relegation of the “Call” to a mere formality during their eighteenth-century ascendancy.

¹³⁵Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 230. “This measure was disliked...by Moderates, who rightly thought it would increase evangelical strength in the ecclesiastical courts such as presbyteries, synods and general assembly which controlled the spiritual life of the Church.” Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” *SHR*, li (April 1972), 23.

¹³⁶W. Bonar to J. Bonar, 25 June 1834 (NLS, MS 15998, 56-7).

¹³⁷Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, 29 October 1834 (SRO, CH2/121/21).

¹³⁸See, for example, *ibid.*, 25 November 1835 and 27 January 1836; “Proceedings of the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale,” *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxxv (May 1836), 272-5.

Voluntary Principle and Vindicating the Rights of Dissenters, formed in 1834 to oversee the Voluntary movement, published a Statement to prejudice the public against the endowments.¹³⁹

To counteract allegations contained in the Statement, the Edinburgh Young Men's Church Association held a public meeting in the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms on 15 April 1835. At the crowded event Cunningham gave a long and well-received speech, noting that the controversy over Church Establishments consisted primarily in "the Church exerting herself to extend her resources, and her opponents [the Voluntaries] exerting themselves to prevent her doing so."¹⁴⁰ The Church, he said, should be satisfied with no less than the whole population attending worship, including the most difficult to reach—the poorest members of society.¹⁴¹ The State should, therefore, "employ the national influence and resources to provide the means of religious instruction for those who are unable to or unwilling to provide it for themselves."¹⁴² After noting the difficulty (from firsthand experience in his own parish) of serving the poorest people in society, Cunningham accused the Voluntaries of neglect in this area:

Dissenters have done little or nothing for the lowest class of the community, for there the expense must be most heavy, and there the provision [of ministers] must be most abundant; and in both these respects the lowest class is beyond their reach,—We are bound to use all fair means to secure the end we have in view, and we call on Government, therefore, to aid us; and we have no prospect of being able to do any thing effectual for this end without national aid, at least not until many who are now walking in the broad way have gone down to the dark chambers of death.¹⁴³

On 12 November 1835 the Edinburgh Young Men's Church Association held their annual meeting in St Andrew's Church. Referring to the prospect of State-endowed churches, Cunningham, as Chairman, reiterated his earlier point of the need for

¹³⁹*First Report of the Edinburgh Young Men's Church Association* (Edinburgh, 1835), 25.

¹⁴⁰*Report of Speeches Delivered at a Public Meeting of the Friends of the Established Church of Scotland, Desirous of Obtaining, through the Aid of the State, an Extension of the Means of Religious Instruction and Parochial Superintendence* (Edinburgh, 1835), 17.

¹⁴¹*ibid.*, 18.

¹⁴²*ibid.*, 16-17.

¹⁴³*ibid.*, 27.

provision for the poor and spoke again of his desire for the whole community to “be in the habit of attending on the means of grace in accordance with God’s word.”¹⁴⁴

There is no likelihood of this great object being fully effected except by the division of the whole community into small districts or manageable parishes, and securing, so far as the best regulations in connexion with adequate resources can, to each parish, the services of a well-qualified minister of the Gospel, whose duty it will be to labour unceasingly for the moral and spiritual welfare of those who are under his charge—a minister who must be supported by an income independent of their contributions, and who must have a church attached to his district, to which he can invite and urge them to come—a church in which the seat-rents shall be no obstacle to the poorest of the inhabitants of the district attending there every Lord’s day.¹⁴⁵

In addition to his efforts on behalf of the Veto Act, the Chapels Act, and Church extension, Cunningham closely supported Alexander Dunlop in seeking eldership reform. Dunlop sought two objectives—“to ensure that only *bona fide* ‘acting’ elders would sit in Assembly, and, at parish level, the full popular election of all elders.”¹⁴⁶ Cunningham, later dubbed “the brother of Alexander Dunlop” because of their close working relationship in this endeavor, focused on the second of Dunlop’s objectives, campaigning for more elders in kirk sessions and for the rights of congregations to elect those elders. Before a House of Commons committee on Church Patronage in 1835, he criticized the existing system for election of elders.¹⁴⁷ “In many parishes,” he said, “the session consists of the minister’s nominees, and it is also well known that their being proposed to the people for their approbation has become a mere form, and as thoroughly a farce as the call of ministers.”¹⁴⁸ The solution was true

¹⁴⁴*First Report of the Edinburgh Young Men’s Association*, 4.

¹⁴⁵*ibid.*, 5.

¹⁴⁶I. Maciver, “The Evangelical Party and the Eldership in General Assemblies, 1820-1843,” *RSCHS*, xx (1980), 8. Dunlop’s concern to have “acting” elders sit in Assembly is easily understood when, for instance, 77 per cent of the elders at the 1832 General Assembly were landowners (many of whom were absentee heritors) or lawyers. Of the lawyers, 97 per cent resided in Edinburgh, many were juvenile advocates who hoped to enhance their practice by displaying their talent for argument in the Assembly, and most followed Lord President Charles Hope in consistent support of the Moderate party. *ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴⁷At that time, ministers often nominated persons to serve as elders; the existing elders then approved the nominations and presented them to the congregation. If the congregation offered objections to any of the candidates, the kirk session would decide whether or not to reject him.

¹⁴⁸“Evidence of Rev. William Cunningham on Patronage,” *The Presbyterian Magazine*, iv

congregational election of elders. At the 1837 General Assembly, Cunningham supported Dunlop in his motion to institute this procedure. Following the son of Sir Henry Moncrieff Wellwood, Lord Moncrieff, who called Dunlop's motion "one of the most pernicious that could be entertained," Cunningham replied:

Moderator, I have the misfortune of differing entirely from the learned lord. We take it for granted that the eldership does stand in need of reformation. I think the evidence is very generally admitted to be conclusive. There are many parishes where there are no elders, and many more where there are only one or two. It is notorious, that, during the last century, the eldership had fallen away very much, and that many persons took the office without having any intention to discharge a single duty. One of the most important reformations in the age of the Reformation, was that of the eldership; and we think it incumbent on us, whatever division such a course of proceeding may occasion, to do all in our power to restore the efficiency of the eldership, which has fallen into such a state of corruption and decay. ... We do desire the reformation of the eldership; we believe this measure will promote that reformation; we feel it incumbent on us to do all in our power to advance the reformation of the Church; and, therefore, we must propose measures in accordance with our principles.¹⁴⁹

Although support for eldership reforms had become a major criterion of Evangelical party allegiance, not all Evangelicals were ready for popular elections.¹⁵⁰ This was even more true of the Moderates. The Moderate periodical, *Church Review*, called Cunningham's proposal a "panacea," which would "prove highly injurious to the Church, by depriving her of nearly all her titled worth, and of no small proportion of her business talent."¹⁵¹ The same article noted Cunningham's manner. "Mr Dunlop," it said, "has been cast in a mould which has given him less vigour and energy, and far less of the aspect of determination, than his brother leader, Mr Cunningham, and we find him more gentle in the wording of his motion."¹⁵² Faced with opposition from some Evangelicals and most Moderates, Dunlop's motion was defeated by 23 votes. The popular election of elders would have to wait until the 1842 General Assembly

(March 1836), 80-1.

¹⁴⁹"Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, x (August 1837), 146-7.

¹⁵⁰D. Chambers, "Mission and Party in the Church of Scotland, 1810-1843" (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Cambridge, 1971), 179.

¹⁵¹"The Eldership," *Church Review*, ii (February 1837), 658-659, 662.

¹⁵²*ibid.*, (July 1837), 320.

before it would enjoy a brief success.¹⁵³

One way to improve the operation of the eldership was to revive the practice of presbyterial visitation, giving presbyteries the opportunity to examine the efficiency of the parish ministry.¹⁵⁴ The second Book of Discipline authorized the practice, and in the autumn of 1835 Cunningham introduced an overture in the Synod of Lothian to require that each parish be visited annually by its presbytery.¹⁵⁵ The *Church Review*, in February 1836, sarcastically criticized the proposal, along with other reforms:

back we must go to the practices and enactments of the olden times. It is alleged, that our present evils all flow from our departure from these, and, of consequence, as a recipe for every ill, a break-water against every impending danger, we have only to retrace our steps, and reestablish the ancient laws and usages of the Church, *i.e.* abolish Patronage, revive Presbyterial Visitations, and make an entire sweep of all the idlers in the Eldership, and greater wonders than Aladdin's lamp ever achieved, will be effected by these simple but magical measures.¹⁵⁶

A letter to the same periodical accused the proposal as being "the attempt at a revival of some of the worst parts of the Popish system, inquisitorial and suspicious interference and priestly domination," and would "almost infallibly expel from the office [of elder], every man who has enjoyed a liberal education, or is possessed in any degree of the finer feelings of human nature."¹⁵⁷ Even Cunningham's biographer viewed the effort as unsuitable to "modern times." His overture, however, was carried in the Synod and transmitted to the General Assembly, which after a year, gave the right to each presbytery to determine if they would make presbyterial visitations.¹⁵⁸

During the early period of Church reform and extension, as the Church began

¹⁵³I. Maciver, "Eldership," *RSCHS*, xx (1980), 9-10.

¹⁵⁴This proposal apparently first arose in the report of 1835 by Dunlop's Committee on the Eldership. "Presbyterial Visitation," *Church Review*, i (September 1836), 356. *First Report of the Edinburgh Young Men's Association*, 47-8. For specific functions of presbyterial visitation, see Rainy, *Cunningham*, 100.

¹⁵⁵"Presbyterial Visitation," *Church Review*, i (September 1836), 358.

¹⁵⁶"The Eldership," *Church Review*, i (February 1836), 649.

¹⁵⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 100; "Presbyterial Visitation," *Church Review*, i (September 1836), 364, 366.

¹⁵⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 100.

implementing the initiatives of the Assembly of 1834, the Evangelical party had been substantially united. A major split within the Evangelical leadership, however, occurred when the Whig Moderate clergyman, John Lee, was suggested as Moderator for the 1837 General Assembly. Lee, who disagreed with much of Chalmers's rationale for Church extension, particularly the ability of the parish system to meet the needs of the urban poor, had expressed these doubts to a Royal Commission of Inquiry, appointed by the Whig Government to investigate the extent of "religious destitution" in Scotland. Chalmers, aware of Lee's testimony, proposed "an undistinguished country minister," Matthew Gardner, for Moderator, whom he knew would support his efforts for Church extension.¹⁵⁹ Openly challenging Chalmers's authority, some of the most eminent men of the old Whig-Evangelical party of Moncrieff Wellwood and Andrew Thomson then officially nominated Lee. In response, Chalmers disregarded all the conventions of polite society and published in early January 1837 a pamphlet entitled *A Conference with Certain Ministers of the Church of Scotland, on the Subject of the Moderatorship of the Next General Assembly*, attacking his leading opponents by name. Surprised and angered by Chalmers's personal attacks, Lee's supporters replied with similar invective in a pamphlet of their own.¹⁶⁰ Chalmers left the task of responding to these personal attacks to Cunningham.¹⁶¹

Cunningham was no "indiscriminate admirer" of Chalmers, having publicly disagreed with him on numerous occasions, but he regarded him "as the brightest living ornament of the Church of Scotland" and vital to Evangelical plans for Church reform and extension.¹⁶² In presbytery, in Lee's presence, Cunningham had already objected to Lee's zeal to be examined before the Royal Commission. "His conduct in

¹⁵⁹Mathieson, *Church and Reform*, 295.

¹⁶⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 260-2.

¹⁶¹*ibid.*, 262.

¹⁶²Cunningham, *Reply to the Statement of Certain Ministers and Elders, Published in Answer to Dr Chalmers' "Conference" on the Subject of the Moderatorship of the next General Assembly* (Edinburgh, 1837), 20.

agreeing to be examined,” he later wrote, “was not only wrong in itself, but manifested a tendency of a somewhat suspicious and dangerous kind.”¹⁶³

Cunningham now responded to Chalmers’s opponents with a pamphlet of fifty pages, entitled, *Reply to the Statement of Certain Ministers and Elders, Published in Answer to Dr Chalmers’s Conference on the Subject of the Moderatorship of the Next General Assembly*. The “great question,” Cunningham stated in the pamphlet, “is whether have those who support or those who oppose Dr Lee taken the more sound and correct view of the duty of the Church in present circumstances?”¹⁶⁴

Cunningham, incensed at the *Statement’s* characterization of Chalmers as “a vain, conceited, arrogant, overbearing man, who cannot endure to be crossed,” regarded its publication “with substantially the same feelings” as he “would contemplate a great sin, in which persons whom I esteemed and loved had been overtaken.”¹⁶⁵ After defending Chalmers from the charges leveled against him, Cunningham argued that Lee, was “not trust-worthy,” not “to be depended upon in those great public questions now pending between the Church and the Government, and therefore, should not be Moderator of the General Assembly.”¹⁶⁶ In his conclusion, Cunningham spoke confidently (and threateningly) of the Church’s ability to succeed in reforming and extending itself, in spite of internal opposition.

It is a very striking, and, it is hoped, will prove an instructive, dispensation of God’s providence, that when the whole Church, notwithstanding differences on other points, was cordially united on the subjects of extension and endowments, and was proceeding in this work with an energy and unanimity that must soon have overcome every obstacle, and crushed every reptile that might have crossed her path, such a man as Dr Lee, standing apart from his brethren upon the subject—a single, solitary dissident—should, in spite of his own insignificance, have been made the mean or the occasion of exciting such a controversy, and producing division among men whose services to the cause were immeasurably superior to his own. But the Church will not allow Dr Lee, or any who may have been tempted to support him, to interfere with the progress and success of this great cause. She will mark her decided disapprobation of their conduct in this matter, and then proceed with greater firmness and energy than ever in the noble work in which

¹⁶³ibid., 32.

¹⁶⁴ibid., 2.

¹⁶⁵ibid., 4-5.

¹⁶⁶ibid., 34.

she is engaged.¹⁶⁷

Cunningham received several replies to his publication. From Chalmers he received a personal letter declaring it “the most important act of kindness which I and my family ever have received from any individual.”¹⁶⁸ Other responses were not so kind, however. Lord Moncrieff prepared a pamphlet entitled, *A Word More on the Moderatorship; in a letter to the Rev. William Cunningham of Trinity College Church, Edinburgh*. Cunningham’s *Statement*, Moncrieff admitted, evidenced “ability and power,” but he reminded Cunningham of his station.¹⁶⁹

There has recently crept into the Church a spirit of spurious boldness, altogether inconsistent with the Christian character.... It is a spirit of unmannerly bearing, and uncourteous speech, of disrespect to superiors, and of studied incivility to equals.... These are men who...call on us perpetually to remember the language of Knox, and the early Reformers, with a wonderful blindness to the aptitude of things for their peculiar seasons, and assume to themselves much credit for zeal in a good cause, and outspoken truthfulness, only because they use the plainest words of vulgar wrangling, and forget the manners of society in fighting the battle of the Church.¹⁷⁰

The *Presbyterian Review*, normally favorable to Cunningham, also took Lee’s side and accused Cunningham of grounding his arguments primarily in “the peculiarities of Dr. Lee’s personal character.”¹⁷¹ Lee himself responded specifically to Cunningham in his pamphlet entitled, *Dr. Lee’s Refutation of the Charges brought against him by the Rev. Dr. Chalmers and Others*. “Mr Cunningham’s pamphlet contains,” he wrote, “as might have been expected, many specimens of self-sufficiency, rudeness, and acrimony. By his delegated pen Dr Chalmers has obtained the advantage of saying many things which it would not have been very becoming to

¹⁶⁷ibid., 48.

¹⁶⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 104.

¹⁶⁹J. Moncrieff, *A Word More on the Moderatorship; in a letter to the Rev. William Cunningham, of Trinity College Church, Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1837), 3, 5.

¹⁷⁰ibid., 7-8.

¹⁷¹“Moderatorship Controversy,” *Presbyterian Review*, ix (May 1837), 555.

say in his own name.”¹⁷² Lee also echoed Moncrieff’s sentiment regarding Cunningham’s short time in the ministry:

He thinks himself entitled to treat me with the utmost disdain, and this feeling he has uniformly expressed in a manner which, if ever so much deserved by me, is not very like the tone and bearing which a minister of less than seven years’ standing would generally think himself entitled to assume towards a man of gray hairs, even though that man were not one who had for thirty years been allowed to be put in trust with the Gospel. He seems to have forgotten the precept, ‘Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father.’¹⁷³

Cunningham had very arrogantly “rebuked an elder,” and had probably been encouraged to do so by Chalmers, who a few weeks before the 1837 General Assembly, “adopted the gentle tone of one hurt and disappointed by his former friends.”¹⁷⁴ Chalmers’s ploy apparently worked. The controversy, which had produced a bitter pamphlet war, culminated on the opening day of the Assembly, 18 May 1837, when Gardner was elected Moderator by a close vote, receiving 62 votes to Lee’s 59.¹⁷⁵

Meanwhile, Francis Nicoll, Principal of the United College of St Andrews University, had recently died. On 12 June 1837, Lee, humiliated by his defeat, accepted the Whig Government’s offer of the vacancy, apparently to escape Edinburgh. Showing signs of mental distraction, however, he did not resign his Edinburgh parish living, nor did he travel to St Andrews to assume his new duties. After many months passed, while he continued to draw both salaries, Lee’s conduct became the topic of severe criticism in private by members of the Edinburgh presbytery.¹⁷⁶ Finally, Cunningham gave notice that he intended to bring charges

¹⁷²J. Lee, *Dr. Lee’s Refutation of the Charges Brought Against Him by the Rev. Dr. Chalmers and Others* (Edinburgh, 1837), 93.

¹⁷³*ibid.*, 93-4.

¹⁷⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 262.

¹⁷⁵D. Shaw, “The Moderatorship Controversy in 1836 and 1837,” *RSCHS*, xvii (1972), 129; Brown, *Chalmers*, 262.

¹⁷⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 263; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 106.

against Lee in presbytery for breaking the 1817 law respecting pluralities.¹⁷⁷ Writing to Robert Haldane, the Principal of St. Mary's College, St. Andrews University, Lee stated "that Cunningham several weeks ago in his boasting and bullying manner...very crouselly [set] forth that he was to bring a libel in his pocket at the December meeting, which must inevitably issue in my deposition."¹⁷⁸ On 30 November 1837 Lee resigned the St Andrews Principalship, and at the December meeting of the Edinburgh presbytery he announced his resignation and asked not to be libeled. Cunningham, however, was not satisfied that this fulfilled the letter of the law. While the General Assembly, he stated, might accept Lee's resignation of the Principalship as complying with the 1817 law, the law had been broken, and the presbytery, as an inferior court, had no right to make that judgment, which in effect involved legislation rather than interpretation. If Lee did not resign his pastoral charge, Cunningham threatened, "it would be competent for the Presbytery, at next meeting, to serve Dr. Lee with a libel."¹⁷⁹ In January, however, Chalmers convinced Cunningham to withdraw his libel proceedings—Lee had experienced enough humiliation.¹⁸⁰

In the summer of 1838, Cunningham's life was threatened by a severe bout of typhus fever. He had taken his wife and two children to Ashton, on the Clyde, within walking distance of his old Greenock home, for an extended time of rest. One day Cunningham went into Greenock to officiate at the wedding of his old friend, John Bonar, now minister of St Andrews. After enjoying the day, Cunningham returned to Ashton with a strange shiver, which was followed by burning heat and dull pains in

¹⁷⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 263. Pluralities involved the holding of a parish living and a university post concurrently.

¹⁷⁸J. Lee to R. Haldane, 2 December 1837 (NLS, MS 3442, fols. 92-3).

¹⁷⁹Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 1 December 1837 (SRO, CH2/121/21). Cunningham's biographer narrated the incident differently: "On Dr Lee's resignation, Mr Cunningham at once intimated that he would not press any motion against him personally. He would still, however, call on the Presbytery to take steps to prevent the recurrence of any such proceeding." Rainy, *Cunningham*, 106.

¹⁸⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 264.

his head and back. Doctors were called, and prayer meetings were held, but for days his life hung in doubt as he lay prostrate, experiencing periods of delirium. Finally, after weeks, Cunningham began to recover. Upon receiving this news, a Moderate minister, who had frequently experienced Cunningham's stinging denouncements in Edinburgh presbytery, probably best expressed the feeling of the Church. "I'm happy at that," he said. "I'm happy at that. I wish we had him back *rampagin* among us."¹⁸¹

The year 1838 was the bicentenary of the celebrated 1638 General Assembly of the Church of Scotland which ratified the National Covenant. Citing Acts of Parliament which had established presbyterianism in Scotland, the Covenant bound its adherers to defend the Reformed faith and to maintain the Church's freedom from State control.¹⁸² The two-hundredth anniversary of this occasion provided an ideal opportunity for the reform-minded Church to commemorate the event and thus to recapitulate its own principles. On 20 December 1838, at a commemoration meeting in the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms, much of the rising Evangelical talent was present—James Begg, Robert Candlish, Thomas Guthrie. But Cunningham, whose health was almost restored, was "the central figure that evening."¹⁸³ The prolonged enthusiasm of the crowd when Cunningham rose to speak was, according to the *Scottish Guardian*, a "gratifying tribute" to one whose distinguished service to the Church had nearly been lost.¹⁸⁴

In his speech, Cunningham contrasted the Presbyterian view of Church and State with that of Roman Catholicism ("the superiority of the ecclesiastical over the civil authority"), Erastianism ("the superiority of the civil over the ecclesiastical authority"), and Voluntaryism ("there ought to be no friendly connection or alliance

¹⁸¹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 120-1.

¹⁸²J.D. Douglas, "National Covenant," *DSCHT*, 620.

¹⁸³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 128. James Begg was the parish minister of Liberton, near Edinburgh; Robert Candlish was minister of the prominent St George's in Edinburgh; and Thomas Guthrie was minister of Old Greyfriars in Edinburgh.

¹⁸⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 128.

between the civil and ecclesiastical powers").¹⁸⁵ In distinction from these views, Presbyterianism asserts both the duty of the Civil Magistrate in religion and the spiritual independence of the Church:

it is the imperative duty of...civil rulers in their official capacity...to aim at the promotion of the true religion... but that Christ having conferred upon his church certain powers and privileges, it is equally the duty of the State to leave the church in the full enjoyment of those rights...that both the civil and ecclesiastical powers are ordinances of God,—that they have...a distinct and separate sphere, within which each has supreme and exclusive jurisdiction....¹⁸⁶

"Our illustrious forefathers," Cunningham said, "many of whom shed their blood for the rights of Christ's crown, and the independence of his church...held both principles with equal firmness, and were as ready to suffer death for the one as for the other."¹⁸⁷

By the time of the Commemoration meeting, Cunningham had risen to prominence in the Church of Scotland, due mainly to the Voluntary controversy. Spurred on considerably by the campaign of radical Voluntarism, he had devoted countless hours to defending, reforming, and extending the Church of Scotland. In the Commemoration meeting, Cunningham struck out one more time at the "affliction" of Voluntarism and reiterated the principles with which his own life had become so inextricably bound up.¹⁸⁸ He also, however, hinted at a more ominous opponent on the horizon.

And if the time should ever come, as it probably may, when we shall be called upon to contend, as in the days of old, for Christ's sole right to govern his house, the knowledge of these principles, and the conviction that they rest on Scriptural authority, will constrain you, and will constrain the people of Scotland, to countenance and support the church in the struggle which seems now to await her—to stand by her as their forefathers did in all her contendings—to bear up by their prayers and exertions amid every difficulty and danger, and to persevere in the contest till, under the guidance of the great Captain of your salvation, you bring it to a glorious and

¹⁸⁵*Report of the Great Public Meeting Held in the Assembly Rooms, Edinburgh, on Thursday Evening, Dec. 20, 1838, to Commemorate the Restoration of Civil and Religious Liberty, and of Presbyterian Church Government, as Secured by the Glasgow Assembly of 1638* (Edinburgh, 1839), 45-6.

¹⁸⁶*ibid.*, 44.

¹⁸⁷*ibid.*, 56-7.

¹⁸⁸*First Report of the Edinburgh Young Men's Association*, 18-19.

successful issue.¹⁸⁹

IV

In 1838, as the Evangelicals celebrated the bicentenary of the signing of the National Covenant, Scotland seemed to be returning to the seventeenth-century ideal of the covenanted nation.¹⁹⁰ In March of that year, however, the British Government effectively denied two key tenets of the Evangelical platform—the establishment principle and the spiritual independence of the Church. After considerable success by the Evangelical Church Extensionists, the Whig government disavowed its responsibility to the Established Church by announcing that it would not provide endowment grants for the many newly-constructed Churches. Contributions for Church Extension rapidly dried up, thwarting the Church's efforts to respond to the needs of a growing population and thus to fend off the Voluntary assault.¹⁹¹ It was the Court of Session's decision in March to deny the legality of the Church's Veto Act, usurping presbyterial authority, however, which Cunningham referred to when he called upon the Church, in his Commemoration speech, to contend for "Christ's sole right to govern his house."

For a time the Church's Veto Act of 1834 had worked reasonably well to secure peaceful settlements of ministers. Parishioners exercised their right with restraint, vetoing only ten presentations between 1834 and 1839 out of 150 settlements of new ministers. And, as Cunningham had predicted, patrons seemingly took parish opinion into greater consideration.¹⁹² Yet trouble lay ahead. The appeal against the Church

¹⁸⁹*Report of the Great Public Meeting*, 57.

¹⁹⁰Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 9.

¹⁹¹*ibid.*, 10.

¹⁹²"The Working of the Veto: No. II," *Church Review*, ii (May 1837), 63ff. "We have seen that the effect of the Veto act has been to throw the appointment of ministers, in the great majority of instances, into the hands of the people,—not any recognized or responsible body among them, but the mass of the heads of the families, or of the whole congregation." ... "Patrons have found themselves placed in such a predicament, that they have thought it their safest course to yield before the novel power which his lordship has created, and have resigned to the parties to whom he gave that power the election of the minister, whom it was their own "just and ancient" right to appoint."

veto by several candidates, not long after its implementation, initiated a conflict which soon involved the nature and location of sovereignty within the British state.¹⁹³

In August 1834, less than three months after the passing of the Veto Act, a vacancy in the Perthshire parish of Auchterarder triggered the first serious appeal against a veto decision.¹⁹⁴ The patron, the Earl of Kinnoul, on 14 October 1834 presented Robert Young, a probationer minister. The male heads of family, however, vetoed the presentation by a vote of 286 to 2 after hearing Young preach. Young appealed, but the General Assembly of 1835 upheld the veto and instructed the Presbytery to proceed according to the Veto Act. After the Presbytery, in obedience to its superior ecclesiastical court, declined to take Young on trials for ordination to the ministry of Auchterarder, Charles Hope, the Dean of Faculty and son of the Lord President of the Court of Session, approached Young. Hope had been a member of the Assembly in 1834 and had formally dissented against the Veto Act. Now he intended to test its legality.¹⁹⁵ Hope persuaded Young to appeal from the ecclesiastical to the civil courts, seeking at first, merely the stipend of Auchterarder.¹⁹⁶ The presbytery, claiming no right to the stipend, replied that it had been improperly called as a party in the action. Hope then amended his action, hoping to have the Court of Session declare that the presbytery of Auchterarder had acted illegally in rejecting Young and that it was bound to take Young on trials for ordination. At this point, the Evangelicals in the Church of Scotland grew concerned at the possible consequences. Cunningham, deeply moved by the action, stated to an old Greenock friend, that this “thing is of the Lord, and we shall know more about it a few years hence.”¹⁹⁷ On 8 March 1838, the Court of Session declared that the Veto

¹⁹³Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 10.

¹⁹⁴J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, ii, 466.

¹⁹⁵Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 10.

¹⁹⁶Cunningham later stated before a large public meeting that the patron and presentee had been encouraged to appeal to the civil court by “some of the leading men in our own Church.” Cunningham, *The Independence of the Church* (Edinburgh, 1839), 7.

¹⁹⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 112.

Act had no existence in law and directed the presbytery to take Young on trials and to induct him, if found qualified in doctrine, education, and morals. To “the great joy of the Seceders and the humiliation of the Evangelicals,” write A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, “the conception of the Church as an independent spiritual community had been repudiated.”¹⁹⁸

The Church, stunned by this action, which in effect dictated conditions for ordination, had no intention of submitting to such humiliation. Bolstered by public zeal for the spiritual independence of the Kirk, which had been fostered by the commemoration of the National Covenant, and incensed at the Government’s recent rejection of the endowment grant, the Evangelicals struck back in the General Assembly of 1838. Maintaining that ordination and installation of ministers were spiritual functions, the Evangelical party succeeded in passing a resolution affirming the spiritual independence of the Church.¹⁹⁹ Cunningham was not a member of this Assembly, but according to his biographer, “he missed scarce an hour of its sittings, or a sentence of its debates.”²⁰⁰ Cunningham later declared that this “declaration of independence” served two purposes. First, it warned the Church that the Court of Session’s decision might be only the beginning of usurpation of ecclesiastical authority by the civil authority; second, it pledged the Church to oppose this encroachment into its jurisdiction.²⁰¹

In addition to affirming its independence, the Assembly decided to appeal against the Court of Session’s Auchterarder decision to the House of Lords, the supreme civil court of the British state. On 4 May 1839, the House of Lords decided in favor of Young and the patron, declaring the Church’s Veto Act to be illegal and denying the Church’s claim to spiritual independence. In delivering his judicial opinion, Lord

¹⁹⁸Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, 234.

¹⁹⁹Brown, *Chalmers*, 297-8; Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 11.

²⁰⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 119.

²⁰¹Cunningham, *Speech Delivered at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Presbytery of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1841), 2.

Brougham described the Church courts as subordinate to the civil government. Members of the Church courts, moreover, were liable to legal action by disappointed patrons and patrons' candidates, and to the imposition of damages by the civil courts.²⁰²

Cunningham was evidently prepared for the decision. On the day of the declaration by the House of Lords, he delivered a lecture defending the Church's action in not ordaining Young at the Court's orders. Reflecting the argument of the 1838 Assembly's resolution of spiritual independence, Cunningham quoted chapter thirty of the Westminster Confession: "the Lord Jesus Christ, as king and head of his Church, hath therein appointed a government in the hand of church-officers, distinct from the civil magistrate."²⁰³ It was this principle, Cunningham continued, that the English Parliament refused to sanction for the English Church, because it understood that doing so would acknowledge the Church's independence in spiritual matters.²⁰⁴ Because this same principle, however, was contained in the Westminster Confession, it "has received the explicit sanction of civil statute in Scotland, and ought therefore to be received as law in the Parliament House as well as in the General Assembly."²⁰⁵

Cunningham also cited chapter twenty-three of the Confession: the "civil magistrate may not assume to himself the power of the keys of the kingdom of heaven." This meant, he argued, that the State could not interfere authoritatively with any exercise of Church power, including the trial of the qualifications of ministers and their ordination.²⁰⁶ If they did so, they were guilty of sin. Ecclesiastical officers, moreover, were guilty of sin if they submitted to the dictation of Civil Courts in Church matters.²⁰⁷ "To obey such an order," he stated, "would be plainly to cast off

²⁰²Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 11.

²⁰³Cunningham, *The Objects, Nature, and Standard of Ecclesiastical Authority* (Edinburgh, 1839), 2-3.

²⁰⁴*ibid.*, 4-5.

²⁰⁵*ibid.*, 5.

²⁰⁶*ibid.*, 9.

²⁰⁷*ibid.*, 36.

the authority of Christ, and to exalt the civil power to his throne.”²⁰⁸ This the Church would never do. “She may suffer,” Cunningham concluded, “but she will not sin. She may expose herself to the loss of many temporal advantages, but her integrity to Christ she will hold fast.”²⁰⁹

Cunningham had focused on the issue of the spiritual independence of the Church courts in this reply to the Auchterarder crisis. There was, however, another distinct but related issue at stake—that of non-intrusion, which had been the basis for Cunningham’s support of the Veto Act in the 1833 General Assembly. On 9 April 1839, in a meeting of the Tradesmen’s Association for Advancing the Interests of the Church of Scotland, held in Edinburgh, Cunningham described the essence of the struggle as a battle for popular rights. “We are contending,” he argued, “for the principle that no man shall be intruded on any congregation, without their consent, tacit or express.” Cunningham also described the practical way in which the Evangelical leadership had chosen to protect this right of non-intrusion. “The last General Assembly,” he reminded the audience, “adopted a declaration, in which they asserted that it was their bounden duty...to adhere to their own inherent jurisdiction, derived from Christ, and embodied in the Standards of the Church, thereby throwing the shield of their own jurisdiction in ecclesiastical matters around the rights of the people.”²¹⁰

Cunningham believed that non-intrusion and spiritual independence both had clear warrant from Scripture and that therefore both rights should be protected, but he disagreed in private with this tactic of relying upon the spiritual independence of the Church courts to safeguard non-intrusion. During the summer of 1839 he attempted to convince Chalmers that spiritual independence was more offensive to civil government than non-intrusion. The Church should, therefore, concentrate on the

²⁰⁸ *ibid.*, 41.

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*, 42.

²¹⁰ Cunningham, *The Independence of the Church*, 7.

issue which originated the controversy—securing for the people, some measure of influence in the settlement of ministers.²¹¹ Later that year, on 27 November 1839, Cunningham gave notice to the Edinburgh presbytery (of which Chalmers was a member) that he intended to make a motion to overture the General Assembly and to petition Parliament on the subject of non-intrusion.²¹² At the December meeting, the presbytery, by a vote of thirty one to thirteen, approved Cunningham’s motion, which called on the Assembly to adhere to the principle of the non-intrusion of ministers and called on both houses of Parliament to enact the necessary laws to secure the full effect of that principle. The presbytery also appointed Cunningham as convener of a committee, which included Candlish, to draft the overture.

The Auchterarder decision expanded the power of the younger zealous Evangelicals, like Cunningham and Candlish, who had gained influence within the Church during the Voluntary controversy. Often referred to as the “Wild party,” these doctrinaire Calvinists, who advocated popular rights and opposed patronage, were “masters of adversary politics, well organized and quick in debate”²¹³ Chalmers, moreover, in the 1839 General Assembly, demonstrated, by his response to the House of Lords Auchterarder decision, an inclination to side with these Evangelicals, committing himself to a hard line on both non-intrusion and spiritual independence.²¹⁴ It was held by some at this time that Cunningham had coerced Chalmers into this position.²¹⁵ Until 12 May 1839, wrote the Moderate minister James Macfarlane, Chalmers had openly declared himself prepared to submit to the House of Lords. But the following morning, “the Hannibal of the day,” Cunningham, “*got round Dr Chalmers.*”²¹⁶ Chalmers did apparently vacillate in the weeks before his Assembly

²¹¹W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1840 (NCL, CHA 4.290.34).

²¹²Record of the Presbytery of Edinburgh, Church of Scotland, 27 November 1839 (SRO, CH2/121/22).

²¹³Brown, *Chalmers*, 303.

²¹⁴*ibid.*

²¹⁵See also J. Bryce, *Ten Years of the Church of Scotland*, i, 93, 191-2. For an opposing opinion, see H. Watt, *Thomas Chalmers and the Disruption* (Edinburgh, 1943), 177.

²¹⁶Macfarlane, *The Late Secession*, 65.

speech, and his Auchterarder response does seem to have been at least partly influenced by Cunningham.²¹⁷ Cunningham had become something of an adviser to Chalmers after the Moderatorship controversy, frequently previewing his statements for publication and on occasion even demanding specific action.²¹⁸ And Chalmers at times demonstrated a willingness to repeal the veto, occasionally ignoring the principle of non-intrusion altogether.²¹⁹ It is true, however, that Chalmers was generally unwilling to compromise over the principle of spiritual independence, and this probably affected his rejection of the House of Lords decision as well.²²⁰

A few days after the close of the General Assembly in 1839, another patronage dispute reached a climax. In 1835, the Crown, as patron of the Perthshire parish of Lethendy, appointed Thomas Clark assistant and successor to the infirm minister of Lethendy. Clark was vetoed, however, and he appealed the decision in the ecclesiastical courts. In January 1837, after the Commission of the General Assembly upheld the veto, the Crown withdrew its presentation of Clark and presented a second candidate, Andrew Kessen. Kessen was accepted by the congregation, but before his ordination, Clark appealed to the civil courts. The Court of Session issued an interdict forbidding the Dunkeld presbytery to ordain Kessen until the Court of Session had ruled on Clark's appeal.

The presbytery referred the matter to the General Assembly, which in June 1838 instructed the presbytery to ordain Kessen without further delay. This the presbytery did in September, thus obeying its ecclesiastical superior against the dictates of the civil court. Two months later, Clark initiated civil action against the presbytery for breach of interdict, and in June 1839 the Court of Session found in Clark's favor. The Court of Session then censured the presbytery, imposed heavy court costs upon its

²¹⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 303.

²¹⁸W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 14 May 1837 (NCL, CHA 4.262.11); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 13 June 1837 (NCL, CHA 4.262.13); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 3 [April] 1838 (NCL, CHA 4.273.27); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1840 (NCL, CHA 4.290.34).

²¹⁹W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1840 (NCL, CHA 4.290.34).

²²⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 302.

individual members, and warned that future acts of disobedience by a Church court would be punished by imprisonment.²²¹

Several months after the Lethendy judgment, in the autumn of 1839, John Hope published a *Letter to the Lord Chancellor*, asserting the Moderate position in a 290-page rambling publication. Hope's central position in the controversy evidently influenced Sir Robert Peel, the Earl of Aberdeen, and the Duke of Wellington.²²² Hope argued that the clergy's lust for power—their attempt to establish an ecclesiastical tyranny—had caused the conflict between Church and State.²²³ But the Church was a creature of the State, declared Hope, completely subordinate to the civil courts in all matters. Since it had decided to rebel against the State, the only option was to employ the full extent of the law to subdue the clergy; if necessary, even to force the rebellious leaders out of the Establishment.²²⁴

Cunningham, incensed by the publication, responded with a *Letter to the Dean of Faculty*, ridiculing Hope's *Letter* and impugning Hope's character. Hope's publication, he wrote, never rises "above the dead level of dreary dullness."²²⁵ "Its tediousness," moreover, "is unrelieved by any display of talent, eloquence, or learning."²²⁶ Hope, himself, came in for more serious charges. "In perusing your Letter," Cunningham stated, "one is constrained to regard you as a thorough bigot, so completely perverted by prejudice as to be incapable of exercising your facilities with fairness or impartiality...."²²⁷ The fact that a man like Hope had attacked the Church, however, was not to be taken as a discouragement:

When a person, Sir, of your views, comes forward to oppose our principles—one who is a

²²¹Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 11-12; Brown, *Chalmers*, 304-5.

²²²Brown, *Chalmers*, 305-6; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 140.

²²³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 140.

²²⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 306.

²²⁵Cunningham, *Letter to John Hope, Esq., Dean of Faculty* (Edinburgh, 1839), 3.

²²⁶*Ibid.*

²²⁷*Ibid.*, 4.

strenuous supporter of that policy which guided the affairs of the Church for seventy or eighty years, to the fearful injury of religion and the ruin of many souls...—one who is so ignorant of the nature of true religion...—when such a person opposes us, and opposes us in the way and by the means which your pamphlet exhibits, we regard all this as a presumption that our views are founded upon the word of God, and fitted to promote his glory, and the welfare of his Church.²²⁸

Cunningham's response to Hope was severe, but less so, Cunningham believed, than Hope deserved.²²⁹ Cunningham's pamphlet was one of three replies to Hope in what now had become an aggressive campaign by the Established Church to keep the state from making further inroads into its ecclesiastical domain.²³⁰ "Pamphlets, speeches, preachings, even prayers, and the newspaper press," wrote one observer, "are all industriously resorted to for the purpose of agitation."²³¹ The patronage disputes of Auchterarder and Lethendy were polarizing Church and State in Scotland.²³²

As Cunningham was publishing his reply to Hope, another conflict over patronage was nearing its conclusion. In 1837, a firm of lawyers representing the Earl of Fife, patron of the Aberdeenshire parish of Marnoch, presented John Edwards to fill the living which had recently become vacant. Edwards, however, had formerly served as assistant minister at Marnoch, and was so disliked by the parishioners that he had been dismissed. The male heads of families now vetoed his presentation by a vote of 261 to 1. The patron then presented a second candidate, David Henry, who was accepted, but Edwards appealed against his veto to the civil court. In June 1839, the Court of Session issued an interdict against the ordination of Henry, to which the 1839 General Assembly responded by instructing the local presbytery of Strathbogie

²²⁸ibid., 22-3.

²²⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 141 fn. It was rumored at the time that Cunningham's pamphlet was suppressed by some of his friends because of its harsh tone. *The United Secession Magazine*, vii (December 1839), 623. Cunningham received a response to his pamphlet: A. Peterkin, *A Layman's Letters to the Rev. William Cunningham of Trinity College Parish, In Reference to his Letter to the Dean of Faculty* (Edinburgh, 1839). The tone of Peterkin's three letters was no less severe than that in Cunningham's pamphlet (see, e.g., 5, 7, 10, Letter One).

²³⁰Thomas Chalmers and Alexander Dunlop also published pamphlets answering Hope: Chalmers, *Remarks on the Present Position of the Church of Scotland, Occasioned by the Publication of a Letter from the Dean of Faculty to the Lord Chancellor* (Glasgow, 1839); Dunlop, *An Answer to the Dean of Faculty's Letter to the Lord Chancellor* (Edinburgh, 1839).

²³¹Peterkin, *A Layman's Letters to the Rev. William Cunningham*, preface, 3, Letter One.

²³²Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 11.

to suspend proceedings. The Church would attempt to negotiate a legislative solution with Parliament. A month later, however, the Court of Session directed the Strathbogie presbytery to take Edwards on trial immediately. Unlike the Dunkeld presbytery in the Lethendy case, the seven Moderate ministers of Strathbogie presbytery, the majority in the presbytery, disregarded the instructions of their superior ecclesiastical court, and decided to take Edwards on trials.²³³ Their action struck at the heart of the dispute between Church and State over conflicting jurisdictions.²³⁴

In December 1839, the Commission of the General Assembly suspended the seven Moderate ministers from the ministry and appointed ministers to conduct religious services in their parishes. On 26 December, the Court of Session responded with an interdict forbidding any minister to enter the Churches of the seven Strathbogie ministers.²³⁵ The Church respected the interdict, and in spite of the winter cold, ministers held religious services in the open air, preaching in fields, in the marketplace, anywhere there was room for the well-attended gatherings.²³⁶ On 14 February 1840, a frustrated Court of Session responded with the notorious “extended interdict,” which prohibited ministers of the Established Church from entering the parishes of the Strathbogie seven to preach or administer the sacraments.²³⁷

The March Commission of the General Assembly condemned the “extended interdict,” and Cunningham and other Non-intrusion ministers “hastened to Strathbogie” in defiance of the interdict to preach in the open air.²³⁸ Upon arrival in Strathbogie, each minister “was duly met with an interdict...and each as duly

²³³ *ibid.*, 14; Brown, *Chalmers*, 307-8.

²³⁴ Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” 26.

²³⁵ Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 14-15; Brown, *Chalmers*, 308.

²³⁶ Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict*, ii, 45.

²³⁷ Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 15; Brown, *Chalmers*, 309.

²³⁸ *ibid.*; Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict*, ii, 49.

disregarded it.”²³⁹ The experience proved invigorating for the participating preachers. “They were now,” Cunningham said, “placed in the same position with the apostles, who were forbidden by the supreme authority of their day, to preach any more in the name of Christ.”²⁴⁰ The parishioners of Strathbogie, moreover, were responsive to these modern day martyrs. Cunningham, for example, later spoke of his own experience preaching in Strathbogie. After dwelling at length “on the joy of the people in hearing the gospel preached to them,” he stated that many “of them...had been led to cry out, what must they do to be saved?”²⁴¹

Even before the extended interdict, Non-intrusionists had been stating their case to the general populace, especially through public meetings. One such gathering, in which Cunningham spoke, occurred on 14 January 1840 in the Edinburgh Assembly Rooms. After he was greeted “with loud cheers, which lasted for some time,” Cunningham addressed the crowded audience, reminding them that “the liberties of the Church of Scotland, and members thereof, have been contended for and maintained in this country since the Reformation.”²⁴² The principle of non-intrusion, he continued, was part of the Church’s constitution; the principle of intrusion was Satan’s. Adhering to the Veto Act, in an attempt to secure for the Church this principle of non-intrusion, “has involved us in all our difficulties; and it is by our succeeding in fully establishing this great principle that the great controversy must be ultimately determined.”²⁴³ In opposition to the two-kingdoms doctrine, on which the principle of non-intrusion is based, “our opponents seem to think...that there is but one King and one kingdom; that the civil authorities ought to exercise their jurisdiction over all matters—in short, their motto might well be...‘We have no King but Caesar.’”²⁴⁴

²³⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 145.

²⁴⁰*Witness*, 19 February 1840.

²⁴¹*ibid.*

²⁴²*ibid.*, 18 January 1840, 15 January 1840.

²⁴³*ibid.*

²⁴⁴*ibid.* Cunningham spoke at a number of Non-intrusion meetings. See e.g., the *Witness*, 15

On 26 February 1840, twelve days after the extended interdict, Cunningham bypassed the normal procedure of giving formal notice and made a motion in the Edinburgh presbytery. The extraordinary action by the Court of Session, he felt, made it urgent to send a memorial to Government expressing the Church's alarm over the civil encroachment into its ecclesiastical jurisdiction. Cunningham delivered a powerful speech, carefully reviewing and answering the speeches of the judges on the Court of Session. As might be expected, however, he treated the eight judges who comprised the majority with little ceremony. One statement gave particular offense. "We did succeed," he declared, "in convincing five of the judges—five of the most eminent men on the bench; and I venture to say, that if the votes had been weighed instead of counted, the decision would have been in our favour."²⁴⁵ The motion passed unanimously, but, according to one who attended the meeting, some like the Evangelical minister William Muir of St Stephen's parish in Edinburgh needed persuading:

Dr Muir was unusually testy & unusually silly, and brought down upon himself a most tremendous but well merited castigation both from Candlish and especially from Cunningham. I should not wonder if he seldom again ventures to shew face & I can easily believe that he lost a night's rest after it. Cunningham's appearance was one of the best I have seen him make.²⁴⁶

The Strathbogie affair further consolidated the power of the "Wild," especially that of Cunningham and Candlish, who were soon afterwards dubbed the "twin brethren," because of their central influence within the Church.²⁴⁷ Even Chalmers, allegedly, was falling increasingly under their influence.²⁴⁸ The fracas had also, Non-intrusionists believed, revealed the true intention of the Court of Session. "In forbidding the Church to enforce internal discipline," writes S.J. Brown, "and even to

January 1840, 5 February 1840, 19 February 1840, 1 April 1840, 26 May 1840.

²⁴⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 144-5.

²⁴⁶James Bonar to John Bonar, 28 February 1840 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 103-4).

²⁴⁷Bayne, *The Free Church of Scotland*, 247.

²⁴⁸D. Aitken to the Earl of Minto, 20 April 1840 (NLS, Minto Papers, MS 11802, fol. 138).

preach in part of the country, its aim seemed to be to reduce the Church to a department of the state.”²⁴⁹ This only increased pressure, begun after the Auchterarder decision by the House of Lords, for the Evangelical Non-intrusionists to find a parliamentary solution.²⁵⁰ The Highest Court in the land had declared existing law to be contrary to their cause; for the collision between Church and State to end, they believed, a new law was needed.²⁵¹

V

Immediately following the House of Lords Auchterarder ruling, the General Assembly of 1839 appointed a standing Non-intrusion Committee to confer with both parties in Parliament about how to resolve the escalating conflict. Their efforts, however, found little initial encouragement. The Whig government of Viscount Melbourne was dependent on the votes of Dissenters, who were for the most part delighted with the troubles of the Established Church of Scotland, while Westminster had little understanding of and little sympathy for the Non-intrusionist claim of spiritual independence. But hopes were raised, when late in 1839, the Earl of Aberdeen, a loyal member of the Church of Scotland and a leader in the Tory party, announced that he intended to frame a bill that he believed would satisfy all parties. After extensive correspondence and meetings with members of the Non-intrusion committee, Aberdeen introduced his bill on 5 May 1840 in the House of Lords.

Several days later Cunningham received a copy of the bill. It was not the measure he had sought. One who happened upon him as he was contemplating the contents of the bill found him poring over it with the “deepest anxiety,” again and again returning to it “as if he could not make up his mind to the cruel conviction, that it kept carefully short of the essential and indispensable provisions, and that all the consequences of

²⁴⁹Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 15.

²⁵⁰Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” 27; *Witness*, 25 March 1843.

²⁵¹Cunningham, *Letters on the Church Question* (Edinburgh, 1842), 8.

rejecting it must be faced.”²⁵² The bill, in fact, replaced the popular veto with a presbytery veto and subjected the presbytery veto to review and revision by the civil courts. In a word, both non-intrusion and spiritual independence were compromised. For many Non-intrusionists who had negotiated with Aberdeen during the drafting of the bill, the final content was a bitter disappointment.

For others, the bill was not at first viewed in such a negative light. Many Evangelicals were evidently willing to acquiesce in the proposed settlement or were at least content to wait for the judgment of the Evangelical Non-intrusionist leaders. The first article, for example, to appear in the Evangelical *Scottish Guardian* after the bill’s introduction acknowledged that while not perfect, Aberdeen’s bill was yet adequate.²⁵³ Moreover, the clergy of Glasgow, “almost to a man,” it was said, were ready to accept the bill.²⁵⁴ Cunningham, however, was completely opposed to the measure and began attempting to convince the Church to reject Aberdeen’s bill. On 13 May 1840, eight days after the bill was introduced, Cunningham delivered one of his “shattering speeches” in the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale. Supporting a motion by Candlish to oppose the bill, Cunningham declared Aberdeen’s bill to be “utterly and incurably bad.”²⁵⁵ If such a bill were passed, Cunningham stated, the State would be guilty of a “grievous act of national sin—having just a tendency to depose the Redeemer from his throne, and to trample under foot the rights of His Church.”²⁵⁶ The motion passed by a large majority of those in attendance, including William Hanna, future son-in-law of Thomas Chalmers. Although he previously expressed approval of the bill, he now “started off to the side of Mr Cunninghame [sic].”²⁵⁷ Cunningham also traveled to Glasgow to address fellow ministers and

²⁵²Rainy, *Cunningham*, 151-2, footnote.

²⁵³Macfarlane, *The Late Secession*, 86.

²⁵⁴Turner, *The Scottish Secession of 1843*, 233-4.

²⁵⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 151-2; *Witness*, 16 May 1840.

²⁵⁶*Witness*, 16 May 1840.

²⁵⁷A. Gordon, *The Earl of Aberdeen* (London, 1893), 137.

evidently convinced many there that the bill was “intolerable.”²⁵⁸ He may also have influenced Chalmers, who, after seeing the bill, disagreed with it, but continued to negotiate with Aberdeen for a compromise measure.²⁵⁹ On 27 May 1840, however, it was clear that his negotiations with Aberdeen were over. In delivering the first annual report of the Non-intrusion committee to the General Assembly, Chalmers urged them to use every means to ensure the bill’s defeat, taking Cunningham’s position that the bill was “incurably bad.”²⁶⁰

On 1 July 1840 Cunningham moved in the Edinburgh presbytery to petition both houses of Parliament against Aberdeen’s bill. In his speech, Cunningham accused Aberdeen and the Tory lay-elder, the Earl of Dalhousie, of ignorance regarding the Reformers’ view of non-intrusion:

I will here advert to another statement brought forward in high quarters by Lord Aberdeen, and still more offensively by Lord Dalhousie, and which only served to show the ignorance of both. They talk of Knox, and Calvin, and Beza—I should like to know what these men know of Calvin, or Knox, or Beza. They know nothing about them.... I assert,—and no man here will venture to dispute it,—that nothing can be produced from the works of Calvin or Beza, which, rightly understood, can be made to prove that these men held the right of the Church Courts to thrust a

²⁵⁸Macfarlane, *The Late Secession*, 86; Turner, *The Scottish Secession of 1843*, 233-4.

Macfarlane has also written that Cunningham and Candlish convinced Buchanan to reject the bill after he had decided to persuade Chalmers of its acceptability. A letter from Buchanan to Lord Aberdeen on 2 May 1840, however, reveals that he had already decided that the bill was unacceptable unless modified. Buchanan, *The Ten Years’ Conflict*, 83-6.

²⁵⁹J. McCaffrey, “The Life of Thomas Chalmers,” *The Practical and the Pious*; ed. by A.C. Cheyne (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1985), 48-50; Gordon, *The Earl of Aberdeen*, 137-8; Bryce, *Ten Years of the Church of Scotland*, 191-2; *The Correspondence between Dr Chalmers and the Earl of Aberdeen* (Edinburgh, 1893), 110.

²⁶⁰Brown, *Chalmers*, 317. Because Chalmers wanted to placate the more adamant Non-intrusion leaders, who by May 1839 had begun to speak openly of severing the Church’s state connection, he was undoubtedly susceptible to their influence. If they seceded from the Church, they would carry much of the young talent of the Evangelical party into the Voluntary camp. Brown, *Chalmers*, 303, 311-2. Correspondence between Cunningham and Chalmers near this time indicates that Cunningham did influence Chalmers. (See, e.g., W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 14 May 1837 (NCL, CHA 4.262.11); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 13 June 1837 (NCL, CHA 4.262.13); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers 3 [April] 1838 (NCL, CHA 4.273.27); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1840 (NCL, CHA 4.290.34). It is also possible, as Moderate minister James Bryce argued, that Chalmers was incapable of suppressing the more zealous Non-intrusionists, that his authority had already begun to diminish. Bryce, *Ten Years of the Church of Scotland*, i, 191-2. The Non-intrusionists, however, knew that Chalmers was a vital part of their desire to keep their majority in the Assembly, which was necessary to the continuation of their reform movement. Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” 27, footnote 3.

minister upon a people, contrary to their will.²⁶¹

Cunningham's motion passed by a vote of thirty-eight to eleven.

At a non-intrusion meeting on 23 May 1840 in the Assembly Rooms, Cunningham had asserted that Aberdeen was not the real author of the bill introduced under his name. "The bill has been constructed," he said, "by some others nearer home, to provide for the restoration of Moderate ascendancy in the Church of Scotland."²⁶² In addition to the Tory Dean of Faculty, John Hope, who counseled Aberdeen throughout the negotiation, Cunningham evidently referred to the Moderate minister James Robertson of the Aberdeenshire parish of Ellon, whose letters were of more influence on Aberdeen than the appeals of the non-intrusionist ministers.²⁶³ In December, Cunningham was more specific. Robertson, Cunningham stated, had "most opportunely" published a 300-page treatise, in which he argued that the Church's Veto Act was illegal and that the non-intrusion of the Reformers was identical to that of the Moderate party. This he had published only a few weeks before Aberdeen's bill appeared, and Aberdeen had used it to argue against the Non-intrusionists' position.²⁶⁴

In April 1840, Cunningham responded with *Strictures on the Rev. James Robertson's Observations upon the Veto Act*, the first installment of a three-fold reply. Robertson's work, Cunningham wrote, was "without any exception, the most respectable production that has yet appeared in opposition to those principles which the Church of Scotland is at present maintaining."²⁶⁵ The non-intrusion of the Moderate party, however, was nothing like that of the Reformers and could "be established only on the ruins of the great Protestant principles of liberty of

²⁶¹ *Witness*, 4 July 1840.

²⁶² *ibid.*, 26 May 1840.

²⁶³ Machin, "The Disruption and British Politics," 29.

²⁶⁴ *Witness*, 19 December 1840.

²⁶⁵ Cunningham, *Strictures on the Rev. James Robertson's Observations upon the Veto Act* (Edinburgh, 1840), 3.

conscience, the right of private judgement, and individual personal responsibility for salvation.”²⁶⁶ To adopt the Moderate principle, moreover, would be to “leave to church courts all the power necessary for enabling them to restore the horrors and abominations of the violent settlements of the last century, and to re-enact the atrocities by which *Moderatism* tracked its progress to the subjugation of the Church of Scotland to the god of this world.”²⁶⁷

At the conclusion of *Strictures*, Cunningham promised a further rebuttal which would demonstrate that Robertson, “from defective information,” had “mistaken and misrepresented the views held by our Church in former days.”²⁶⁸ Before this could be completed, Cunningham also sent a letter to the *Witness*, which appeared on 23 May 1840, identifying an embarrassing mistake in Robertson’s pamphlet. “Mr Robertson,” he wrote, “had evidently taken his quotations from Calvin and Beza, from the speech of one of the Lords of Session on the Auchterarder case, Lord Medwyn, and not consulted—perhaps never seen—the originals. He faithfully copies Lord Medwyn’s errors....”²⁶⁹ In late 1840 Cunningham published the most thorough of his replies to Robertson—*Defence of the Rights of the Christian People in the Appointment of Ministers*—a lengthy and detailed account of the history of the Church and the principle of non-intrusion. The Church, he concluded, should not abandon the principle of non-intrusion, though the Church may be overthrown “through the infatuated folly of our adversaries.” By maintaining this principle,

she is walking in the footsteps of the apostles,—the reformers,—and the martyrs,— of all who laboured or suffered for Christ in Scotland, from the Reformation till the restoration of patronage. Being ‘compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses,’ we trust she will ‘run with patience’ the race set before her, ‘looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.’²⁷⁰

²⁶⁶ibid., 26.

²⁶⁷ibid.

²⁶⁸ibid., 40.

²⁶⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 155.

²⁷⁰Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian*, ed. by J. Buchanan and J. Bannerman (Edinburgh, 1863; repr. Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 467.

The pamphlet duel was conducted between men who developed a deep respect for each other's abilities.²⁷¹ Cunningham's command of historical detail and his power in debate were well known. But with the publication of *Observations*, Robertson, future Professor of Divinity and Ecclesiastical History at the University of Edinburgh, emerged as possibly the most able defender of the Moderate position.²⁷² His notable efforts were a reflection of the revival, after the patronage disputes, of the Moderate party in the Church of Scotland, which, against the Evangelical Non-intrusionists, advocated "a return to both the patronage policies and the more cordial Church-State relations of the late eighteenth century" and "agreed with the civil courts that the Veto Act was illegal."²⁷³

The Aberdeen affair had further damaged the unity of the Church, increasing the divide that existed between the two ecclesiastical parties. As the more militant Non-intrusionists began to dominate the Evangelical party, the Moderate party increasingly declared principles in opposition to those of the Veto Act, sometimes denying the doctrine of spiritual independence.²⁷⁴ The Aberdeen episode had also destroyed any real hope for a parliamentary solution to the controversy between Church and State. Cunningham never again had confidence in the possibility of help from government.²⁷⁵ The vigorous opposition that Aberdeen's bill received from men like Cunningham, Chalmers, and Candlish, led Aberdeen to withdraw his bill.²⁷⁶ He afterwards became a determined enemy of the Evangelical Non-intrusionists in the Church, an enemy who exercised considerable influence upon the Tory leader Sir

²⁷¹ A.H. Charteris, *Life of the Rev. James Robertson* (Edinburgh and London, 1863) 87.

²⁷² *Witness*, 1 April 1843.

²⁷³ Brown, *Chalmers*, 302.

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 320; McCaffrey, "The Life of Thomas Chalmers," *The Practical and the Pious*, 48.

²⁷⁵ W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1840, (NCL, CHA 4.290.34).

²⁷⁶ Aberdeen, in the House of Lords, had cited Cunningham's speech before the Synod against his bill. "He has, stated Cunningham, "skillfully selected two or three garbled extracts from my speech, for the avowed purpose...that the opposition was conducted merely by fanatical fools." *Witness*, 26 May 1840.

Robert Peel.²⁷⁷ The Whig government, moreover, used the Aberdeen episode to extricate themselves from any obligation to aid the Church. The Non-intrusionists, they declared, evidently preferred to deal with the Tory party.²⁷⁸

The prospect of a legislative solution was further diminished with the continuation of the Strathbogie patronage dispute. The Church, it will be recalled, had suspended the seven ministers of the Strathbogie presbytery in December 1839 for defying the General Assembly and giving trials to John Edwards. The dispute escalated when the Court of Session responded by declaring the suspension invalid and instructing the presbytery of Strathbogie to ordain Edwards minister of Marnoch.²⁷⁹ Early in January 1841 it was well known in the Church that the suspended ministers intended to ordain Edwards, and a special meeting of the Edinburgh presbytery was called. On 6 January 1841, at the unusually crowded presbytery meeting, Cunningham moved resolutions against the recent decision of the Court of Session to ordain Edwards. In addition to calling the Church of Scotland to stay the course, Cunningham took a swipe at the suspended ministers.²⁸⁰ "I hope," he said, "when they proceed to admit and ordain Mr Edwards, they will not venture to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ; I hope they will have the courage and the honesty to do it in the name of her Majesty Queen Victoria, according to their oaths of allegiance."²⁸¹ On 21 January 1841, the seven ministers, in obedience to the Court of Session, ordained Edwards minister of Marnoch.

The Marnoch ordination stiffened the resolve of the Non-intrusionists. In May 1841, the General Assembly, ignoring a Court of Session interdict, deposed the seven suspended ministers of Strathbogie. Seconding Chalmers's motion to depose, Cunningham stated that first, "they had broken the laws of the Church; secondly, that

²⁷⁷Machin, "The Disruption and British Politics," 39.

²⁷⁸Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 16.

²⁷⁹Brown, *Chalmers*, 320.

²⁸⁰Cunningham, *Speech Delivered at an Extraordinary Meeting of the Presbytery of Edinburgh*, 6.

²⁸¹*ibid.*, 2.

they had violated their ordination vows; and, thirdly, that they had been guilty of a sin against the Lord Jesus Christ.”²⁸² Moderates, outraged by the last charge, loudly voiced their disapproval. Cunningham immediately repeated his assertion. The suspended ministers had sinned against Christ because they had appealed to the State in a purely spiritual matter, thus renouncing the allegiance “they owed to the Lord Jesus Christ as the only King and Head of his Church.”²⁸³ Their offense, Cunningham continued, was “high treason against Jesus Christ,” and “the sentence of deposition they were this evening called to pronounce, was a sentence that would be ratified in heaven.”²⁸⁴ After a debate of nearly twelve hours, the motion passed by a vote of 222 to 125.²⁸⁵

What was now being caricatured as the “reel of Bogie” was not over, however. Late in July 1841, several Moderate leaders, including James Bryce and James Robertson of Ellon, expressed solidarity with the seven deposed ministers by traveling to Strathbogie and assisting them in serving the communion sacrament. The General Assembly Commission of August 1841 responded by issuing a “solemn remonstrance and warning” to the Moderate offenders.²⁸⁶ In a supporting speech, Cunningham accused the offenders of committing “a great and heinous crime,” and noted that their actions revealed “a determination to make a schism in the Church.”²⁸⁷ Nevertheless, the Church must adhere to its principles. “God in his providence is now putting us to the test,” and if a separation, which “I will sincerely deplore,” does occur, “we are not responsible for it.”²⁸⁸

Not long after the August Commission, Robertson of Ellon, in reply to a speech by

²⁸²“Ecclesiastical Intelligence,” *Presbyterian Review*, xiv (July 1841), 353.

²⁸³*ibid.*, 357.

²⁸⁴*ibid.*, 353, 357.

²⁸⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 321; *Witness*, 29 May 1842.

²⁸⁶Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 17; Brown, *Chalmers*, 322.

²⁸⁷*Report of the Proceedings at the Meetings of Commission of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Held on 11th and 25th August 1841* (Edinburgh, 1841), 22-3.

²⁸⁸*ibid.*, 24.

Cunningham, began his own campaign against the Evangelical censure of the Moderate ministers who had aided the deposed Strathbogie ministers. His efforts culminated in a lengthy pamphlet, entitled, *Answer to the Remonstrance and Warning*. Cunningham, in response, sent four letters to the *Witness* in January and February 1842, and in April, published these with two others in *Letters to the Church Question*. In the Edinburgh presbytery speech that began the contest between these two men, Cunningham had labeled the Moderates erastian and argued that the “Moderate party, in order to defend their principles, must maintain either that the Civil Magistrate is entitled to exercise jurisdiction in the Church of Christ...or else that an Established Church is not a Church of Christ.”²⁸⁹ Robertson, in return, stated that the Church was bound by compact with the State to do just as the Moderates had done in the Strathbogie affair—to ordain Edwards minister of Marnoch. Because this argument had become the most frequently voiced argument of the Moderate party, Cunningham devoted most of his pamphlet to refuting the existence of such a compact. It was, he wrote, inconsistent with Scripture, the rights of the Christian people, and the best interests of religion; it was in itself sinful and therefore non-binding; and it was contrary to the principles of the books of Discipline, and consequently a compact to which the Church could never have consented.²⁹⁰

Cunningham concluded his speech before the August Commission by acknowledging the likelihood of a disruption of the Church of Scotland. The Commission’s deposition of the Strathbogie seven had made that disruption almost inevitable, as a second attempt at a Parliamentary solution to the Church’s trouble would soon make clear. In early May 1841, the Tory Duke of Argyll had introduced a bill in the House of Lords to legalize the popular veto, if it could be shown not to have resulted from irrational prejudice.²⁹¹ The bill did not go far enough for

²⁸⁹Cunningham, *Letters on the Church Question*, 5,11.

²⁹⁰*ibid.*, 48-9.

²⁹¹Brown, *Chalmers*, 322-3.

Cunningham, in that it did not abolish patronage, but he voted to accept it in the 1841 Assembly, because “it would put an end to the oppressions of the civil court, and leave the ministers to go about the exercise of their ministry in peace.” Though it would not settle the existing patronage disputes, he continued, “it would prevent all such cases in time to come.” The Assembly, by a majority of 125, voted to approve the bill, and in late June a deputation from the Church went to London to present their cause before Sir Robert Peel, who had formed a government after the general election in the summer of 1841. Peel, a strong erastian, decidedly hostile to the non-intrusion cause, informed the deputation in June 1841 that his party would not support Argyll’s bill, or any similar measure, until the Assembly repealed the depositions of the Strathbogie ministers.²⁹²

In their support of the ill-fated Argyll bill, the Non-intrusionists had been united. A third attempt at a legislative solution, however, divided even the Non-intrusion committee. Late in 1841 the Tory Scottish MP, Sir George Sinclair, proposed adding a clause to Lord Aberdeen’s bill which would give the presbytery enhanced power to reject a presentee who was unacceptable to a congregation. The Non-intrusionist committee replied that if no better measure could be obtained from Parliament, they were willing to acquiesce in the bill in order to avoid a disruption, as long as it was altered to contain what was known as a *liberum arbitrium*. A presbytery must have the right, they argued, to reject a presentee even if the congregation’s reasons for objecting prove inconclusive to the presbytery. It must have the right to consider, in addition to the soundness of the objections, the number of parishioners objecting to the presentee and the extent to which they object. In early October the Non-intrusion committee gave a qualified approval to the bill in this form. The Evangelical leader and member of the Non-intrusionist committee, Robert Gordon, proclaimed from his pulpit, “with joyfulness of heart,” that an end to the Church’s tremendous struggle

²⁹²ibid., 323.

with the State was a realistic hope, a legislative solution was now achievable.²⁹³

Cunningham, however, by late November, was no longer willing to support the bill.²⁹⁴ By December, a majority of the committee agreed, and expressed its dissatisfaction with the present form of the bill, claiming to have misunderstood its full meaning.²⁹⁵ Now the *liberum arbitrium* must be understood as providing the presbytery with “absolute power to refuse to settle the presentee, on the specific ground of the continued unwillingness of the people to receive him,” even if reasons, once stated, were then abandoned.²⁹⁶ Even this, however, was not enough for many in the Church of Scotland. Alarmed that the popular veto might give way to a presbyterial veto and that the presbytery would then have the freedom to intrude an unwanted minister, opponents of Sinclair’s bill wrote letters to the newspapers against the *liberum arbitrium*.²⁹⁷

Cunningham and Candlish, in an effort to defend the committee’s position and to reassure the concerned members of the Church of their continued allegiance, called a meeting with the Edinburgh Tradesmen’s Association. On 6 January 1842, Cunningham assured those in attendance that he and others in the Church would not be completely satisfied apart from the abolition of patronage, but that conscience allowed him to acquiesce in the *liberum arbitrium*, if offered by Parliament, in that it was not inconsistent with the principle of non-intrusion. All that was necessary to achieve the practice of non-intrusion, he stated, was “that the people shall be at full liberty to give their dissent, and that the Church Courts be at full liberty to give effect to it.”²⁹⁸ This the *liberum arbitrium* did. Cunningham acknowledged that it also left the presbytery at liberty to intrude an unwanted minister, but, he continued, there was

²⁹³J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, ii, 509-510; J.M. Hog to G. Sinclair, 27 November 1841 (SRO CH2/653/1).

²⁹⁴J.M. Hog to G. Sinclair, 27 November 1841 (SRO CH2/653/1).

²⁹⁵J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, ii, 511.

²⁹⁶Turner, *The Scottish Secession of 1843*, 263.

²⁹⁷*Witness*, 8 January 1842, 19 January 1842, 22 January 1842.

²⁹⁸*ibid.*, 8 January 1842.

“no possible security against the growth of corruption in the Church.”²⁹⁹ He had thus defended the position of the Non-intrusion committee, a position which was a surprising compromise for Cunningham. He probably best spoke his own feelings, however, when he stated in the same speech that “I can have no hesitation in saying of the *liberum arbitrium* that I cordially dislike it—I wish it had never been devised, and that it were now entirely obliterated.”³⁰⁰ Cunningham received his wish. On 18 January 1842, Sinclair wrote to one of the members of the Non-intrusion committee, that “I have now entirely dropped the whole concern.”³⁰¹ “The Committee has,” moreover, “in my opinion, thrown away the only means and last opportunity for extricating the Church from her perilous position.”³⁰²

By the end of December 1841, decisions within the Non-intrusion committee were far from unanimous. Not all members were so ready to give up on Sinclair’s legislation. One of these men was Alexander Lockhart Simpson of Kirknewton, who with about forty non-intrusionist ministers in the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr now declared their willingness to accept Sinclair’s modification of Aberdeen’s bill.³⁰³ The formation of this “middle party” in March 1842, seemingly promising a break in non-intrusionist ranks, stiffened the resolve of Peel and the Tories not to negotiate with the Church until the deposed Strathbogie ministers were reinstated.³⁰⁴

Other forces were at work, however, which bolstered the resolve of the Non-intrusionist leaders not to bow to external pressure and compromise their principles of non-intrusion and spiritual independence. In the summer of 1839 a religious revival had begun in Kilsyth; by the autumn of 1839, the revival had spread to Dundee; and during 1840 there were local revivals in Angus, Aberdeenshire, and Ross-shire

²⁹⁹ibid.

³⁰⁰ibid.

³⁰¹G. Sinclair, *Selection from the Correspondence Carried on During Certain Recent Negotiations for the Adjustment of the Scottish Church Question* (Edinburgh, 1842), 110.

³⁰²ibid.

³⁰³A.L. Simpson, *Statement in Reference to a Late Division in the General Assembly’s Non-intrusion Committee* (Edinburgh, 1842); Campbell, *Two Centuries*, 259.

³⁰⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 326; Machin, “The Disruption and British Politics,” 42.

counties. These revivals, writes S.J. Brown, “cast light on the real differences in piety and doctrine that separated Evangelicals and Moderates, and brought many Evangelicals to look more favourably on the idea of a gathered Church of true believers, bound by shared emphasis on conversion and Reformed doctrine, and enjoying independence from an increasingly secular state and society.”³⁰⁵

Cunningham, though not desirous of a disruption of the Church, was nevertheless prepared for one. On 25 August 1841, encouraged by the revivals, he urged a packed General Assembly Commission to “adhere firmly to our principles.”

The Church has, at this moment, many grounds of thankfulness. There are many reasons which induce us to take courage—, among others, the revival which, in various corners, God has been giving to many portions of our Church; and I regard this as a distinguished token of divine favour among the rest, that he is placing his Church in circumstances in which she is called on to contend for those great truths, the maintenance of which has been the great glory of the Church of Scotland, and adorns the brightest page in its history.³⁰⁶

Interpreting these revivals as God’s blessing on their efforts, the Non-intrusionist majority in the 1842 General Assembly proceeded to pass two major acts. First, by a vote of 241 to 110, the Assembly adopted the “Claim of Right,” a renewed expression of its resolve to maintain the principles of non-intrusion and spiritual independence. This final appeal to the state recognized the right of the state to take back what it had given—endowments and buildings,—but the Church would not recognize the power over ordination and ecclesiastical discipline. To do so would be to rob the Church of Scotland of its identity as a Church of Christ.

Secondly, despite Chalmers’s request that the Evangelicals ignore the subject, Cunningham introduced a motion calling for the abolition of patronage.³⁰⁷

³⁰⁵Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 15; see also *Presbyterian Review*, xii (October 1839), 360-375; Thomas Brown, *Annals of the Disruption*, new edn (Edinburgh, 1893), 7-19.

³⁰⁶*Witness*, 28 August 1841.

³⁰⁷Brown, *Chalmers*, 328; Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 18.

Cunningham's views on the subject had changed greatly during the fifteen years since his student essay for the Church Law Society in 1827. Then, it will be recalled, he had argued that patronage did not violate any right of the Church—the election of ministers was not an “inalienable right” of the Church.³⁰⁸ By 1833, he had begun to prefer the popular election of ministers to patronage as an aid to Church extension, but still did not believe that it was required by Scripture or the Westminster Confession.³⁰⁹ By January 1834 he had begun to openly oppose patronage, and in 1835 he had given evidence on the subject before a committee of the House of Commons. Demonstrating a comprehensive knowledge of the history of patronage in the Church of Scotland, Cunningham argued against it largely on pragmatic grounds, believing Scripture to be unclear on the subject. In response to a question on the effects of patronage since its restoration in 1712, Cunningham stated:

Its injurious effects in producing simony, in leading to the introduction of useless, unfaithful, and unacceptable ministers, in alienating the affections of the people of Scotland from the church, in producing secession and dissent, and in obstructing the providing of church accommodation for the increasing population, have been so great, that it is scarcely possible to exaggerate them.³¹⁰

In 1837, Cunningham had become the leader of the anti-patronage movement when he first brought before the General Assembly a motion to declare patronage a grievance and to appoint a committee to determine the best means to abolish it.³¹¹ Here, in a further change of opinion, he had struck out at patronage as “not only unscriptural but anti-scriptural.”³¹² The principle of men being able to nominate ministers based solely on the civil qualification of property ownership was “inconsistent with scriptural views of the freedom, independence, and spirituality of

³⁰⁸Cunningham, “Essay on the Constitution of the Church of Scotland, 29 January 1827 (NCL, CHU 29) 47.

³⁰⁹W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 22 February 1833 (NLS, MS 15988, fols. 134-5).

³¹⁰“Evidence of Rev. William Cunningham on Patronage,” *The Presbyterian Magazine*, iv (January 1836), 8.

³¹¹J. Cunningham, *The Church History of Scotland*, 501, 514.

³¹²“Proceedings of the General Assembly,” *Presbyterian Review*, x (August 1837), 174.

Christ's kingdom, of the authority which he exercises over it, and of the rights which he has conferred upon it."³¹³ Cunningham's motion at the Assembly of 1837 had been defeated by a vote of 166 to 96. At the General Assembly of 1841, he had made a similar motion to abolish patronage, stating that "patronage is a plant which our heavenly Father hath not planted, and which must therefore be rooted out."³¹⁴ This time his motion had been narrowly defeated by the vote of 133-139.

In the 1842 Assembly, expecting a victory, Cunningham made a motion to declare that patronage was a grievance, that it was "the main cause of the difficulties in which the church is presently involved, and that it ought to be abolished."³¹⁵ "It has always been maintained by presbyterian divines," he declared, "that nothing ought to be admitted into the worship and government of Christ's house which has not a positive sanction and warrant from the word of God."³¹⁶ Nothing in Scripture, he continued, justified the "interference of patrons." That "the Christian people are entitled to the substantial choice of their own officers" was, on the other hand, the position of Scripture, the primitive Church, and the Reformers.³¹⁷ Cunningham had finished with waiting for the State to effect a resolution to the problem:

I call upon you to remember the truth...that God regulates the proceedings of nations, and that with him there is nothing impossible; and that we will not be disappointed in depending on the words of His mouth as to when and how we shall be delivered from the difficulties and dangers which at present surround us. We shall, therefore, place our dependence on the word of His power; and realizing this, we must consider not what paltry expediency would suggest,—whether our proceedings shall conciliate one party or irritate another party,...let us consider what is our duty, according to the word of God, and follow it out boldly.³¹⁸

The Church should not take political opinion into consideration, but it should, Cunningham believed, consider public opinion:

³¹³ibid., 173-5.

³¹⁴"Ecclesiastical Intelligence," *Presbyterian Review*, xiv (July 1841), 295.

³¹⁵"Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, xv (1842), 53-5.

³¹⁶ibid., 57.

³¹⁷ibid.

³¹⁸ibid., 64.

If the Church of Scotland shall be mean and cowardly enough to refuse on the present occasion to enter her decided protest against patronage, and demand its entire abrogation and removal, it will forfeit the confidence of the great majority of the people of Scotland, who have a cordial and heart-hatred of patronage, and on them, under God, must in a great measure depend the deliverance of the church and her victory over her enemies.³¹⁹

The speech was long, the debate a two-day affair, and the Assembly hall crowded and hot.³²⁰ Finally, by the unexpected majority of 69 votes (216 to 147), Cunningham's motion was carried, and petitions were sent to both houses of Parliament declaring patronage a grievance and seeking new legislation to remove this source of evil.³²¹

After nine years of urging the abolition of patronage in the Church courts and in public meetings, Cunningham achieved what the evangelical periodical, *The Presbyterian Review*, described as a triumph for the anti-patronage cause.³²² The periodical also declared the vote a vindication of the Church's assertion that it had not been seeking power for the clergy, but "liberty for the Christian people."³²³ In truth, Cunningham's war against patronage had been waged with an amalgam of motivations—mixture of principle and expediency. The popular support which would be gained by the abolition of patronage, he believed, was essential for the success of Church extension, the stability of the Church of Scotland as an established Church, and the spiritual independence of the Church courts. Especially after the fiasco of Aberdeen's bill, which alienated both political parties from the Non-intrusionists, popular support might offer the only voice to which Parliament would listen.³²⁴ More likely, in the event of a disruption, popular support would be vital to efforts to begin

³¹⁹ibid.

³²⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 177.

³²¹Brown, *Chalmers*, 328; "Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, xv (1842), 100-1.

³²²*Witness*, 5 May 1840, 12 August 1840, 19 September 1840, 28 November 1840, 12 December 1840, 26 December 1840; "Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, xv (1842), 100.

³²³"Proceedings of the General Assembly," *Presbyterian Review*, xv (1842), 101.

³²⁴W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 7 August 1841 (NCL, CHA 4.290.34).

the new Church.

In mid-June, the Government gave the Church a preliminary answer to its desire for new legislation and its "Claim of Right." Peel told the House of Commons that after careful deliberation on the Church situation, "Her Majesty's Government had abandoned all hope of settling the question in a satisfactory manner, or of effecting any good by introducing a measure relative to it."³²⁵ By autumn, the Non-intrusionist leaders were resigned to the certainty of an impending disruption. From 17 to 24 November 1842, they held a Convocation in Edinburgh to plan for the coming break, inviting only ministers believed to hold Non-intrusionist principles to attend.³²⁶ By the time of the Convocation, it was widely believed that Cunningham and Candlish were exerting excessive influence over Church affairs and over Chalmers himself. Conservative ministers in London, Moderate clergy in Scotland, and even rural Evangelical clergy, were critical of the extent of their sway over Church affairs. This might explain why Cunningham, who had been so vocal throughout the Non-intrusion controversy, had little to say during the Convocation (even declining to speak at one point when called upon), believing it wise to remain in the background.³²⁷ He did, however, support Candlish's resolve to base the final stand with the Government on spiritual independence and non-intrusion.³²⁸ This was the minimum they would require to remain an established Church. Near the close of the six-day meeting, Cunningham, with 353 of the 465 ministers in attendance, signed a pledge to demit

³²⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 328-9.

³²⁶Brown, "The Ten Years' Conflict," *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 19.

³²⁷P. Bayne, *The Free Church of Scotland*, 247. A letter from Cunningham to Chalmers near this time may confirm the extensive influence of Cunningham and Candlish over the Church: "There was one thing about last Assembly which I regretted and that was that the concluding party of the discussion on the Claim of Rights was not particularly effective. Candlish and I intended as we had spoken the day before and as there were so many speakers to leave it to others, but when we saw the debate getting on rather long and we would most willingly have spoken if we could have done it then without danger of hurting the feelings of others." W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 28 July 1842 (NCL, CHA 4.302.72).

³²⁸W. Wilson, *Memorials of Robert Smith Candlish, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1880), 225. See also Bayne, *The Free Church of Scotland*, 253-4.

his charge if Parliament should reject the Claim of Right.³²⁹

On 4 January 1843, the Government dismissed the Claim of Right as “unreasonable,” and announced its refusal to consider the demands. Later that month Cunningham participated in one of many deputations which now began to travel throughout Scotland organizing support for a Free Church.³³⁰ He also began addressing large public gatherings in Edinburgh for the same purpose. These meetings were opportunities to urge adherence to the principles of Non-intrusion and spiritual independence. They were also opportunities to deride members of both the Moderate Party and the Middle Party, who would remain behind in a “residuary Establishment.” On 13 April 1843, at a meeting in the United Secession Church, Bristo Street, Cunningham’s comments on these men was met with repeated and continued laughter:

As to those who remain behind, they will consist chiefly of two classes, the old ordinary Moderates, and a number of men who at one time professed to hold the principles which we hold, and who profess, though not so loudly, to hold them yet. With regard to the Moderates, they will certainly form the much honester part of the residuary Establishment, for, from the very beginning of this controversy, they have virtually declared that they were determined to keep their stipends, come what might, and accordingly they laid down their principles in a way which, whatever happened, would enable them to do so. They have all along openly declared that they see nothing wrong in thrusting a minister on a reclaiming congregation, and in having their ecclesiastical procedure subjected to the control of the Court of Session. These are, and always have been their principles—if principles they are, which are none—and now they find that having laid such good ground some three or four years ago, they can, with perfect consistency just stay where they are.³³¹

At a similar meeting held in the Waterloo Rooms, Edinburgh, on 22 March 1843, Cunningham stated that the disruption was inevitable, that they could “no longer, as honest men, remain in connection with the Established Church of Scotland.” “Our duty,” he continued, “is to suffer rather than sin; and we may rest assured, that if we

³²⁹Brown, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 19.

³³⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 187-9.

³³¹*Adjourned Meeting of the Members of Lady Yester’s Congregation Favourable to the Spiritual Independence of the Church, 13 April 1843* ([Edinburgh], 1843), 24-5.

do that, God will bless and accept the testimony for His truth, and the sacrifices for His cause.”³³²

After ten long years of controversy, the Disruption was just weeks away. The Church of Scotland had battled Voluntaries; Tory Evangelicals had battled Whig Evangelicals; Evangelical Non-intrusionists had battled Moderates, Court of Session, and House of Lords; and the more adamant Non-intrusionists had battled the Middle Party. It had been a conflict in which Cunningham had confidently engaged, committed throughout to a high view of the Reformation principles of spiritual independence and non-intrusion. Even before the Voluntary controversy, Cunningham had defended the Establishment principle, but had argued that the Church of Scotland would have to renounce its connection with the State if its spiritual independence were compromised.³³³

Cunningham had not sought a disruption of the Church, nor was he to blame for the intrusion of the State into Church affairs, but his prominent role in the “Ten Years’ Conflict” had helped to popularize the Evangelical Non-intrusionist cause and to strengthen the resolve of the Church courts to maintain their spiritual jurisdiction. There had been two points during the controversy in which at least a temporary truce between the Church of Scotland and the State seemed possible—at the time of the House of Lords Auchterarder decision in May 1839 and during the negotiations over Lord Aberdeen’s bill in early 1840. At both junctures, Cunningham, had adamantly refused to compromise and evidently convinced Chalmers to do the same. Finally, with Cunningham’s disapproval of Sinclair’s bill in its original form, the fate of the Establishment was sealed. The Disruption would have probably been less significant in terms of the number of ministers and members leaving the Church of Scotland without the charismatic figure of Chalmers. But it may never have occurred without

³³²*Witness*, 25 March 1843.

³³³Cunningham, “Essay on the Constitution of the Church of Scotland,” 29 January 1827 (NCL, CHU 29), 32-47.

the determination of Cunningham. Cunningham had exercised a tremendous influence over the chain of events leading to the Disruption, not willing to give in to a government which, according to historians A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch, “had been created to maintain the Church,” but had become “an instrument for throttling her.”³³⁴

Through his many speeches and pamphlets, Cunningham had risen to the leadership of the more zealous wing of the Evangelical party. Along the way, he had made enemies, impressed friends and foes, and even won some converts to the cause. “Apostate and perjured” Voluntaries, “hypocritical” Moderates, “chicken-hearted” Evangelicals, and “lightweight” civil court judges had all received Cunningham’s stinging rebukes of their character and their arguments. Though often harsh, his speeches demonstrated an ability in debate that was widely recognized. The hall on St David Street, where Edinburgh presbytery met, was said to be “crammed to suffocation” when Cunningham was to speak.³³⁵ A leading Edinburgh Evangelical, when asked why he did not make speeches in presbytery meetings, responded, “when Cunningham and Candlish speak on a subject there’s no need for any other man to say a word.”³³⁶ Even the extreme Moderate James Bryce, though frequently disagreeing with Cunningham, acknowledged that “all the speeches of this talented churchman” produced “a very powerful effect on the Assembly.”³³⁷ One of those speeches, which supported the 1841 General Assembly deposition of the Strathbogie seven, converted the future Free Church minister and theologian Hugh Martin from Moderatism to Evangelicalism.³³⁸ Cunningham’s brilliant, often severe, speeches commanded respect, but his private manner surprised many who had only known his public persona. In person, Cunningham was gracious and gentle, not at all what might be expected.

³³⁴Drummond and Bulloch, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843*, 257.

³³⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 144.

³³⁶Guthrie, *Thomas Guthrie*, ii, 24.

³³⁷Bryce, *Ten Years of the Church of Scotland*, ii, 145.

³³⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 158.

During the autumn of 1842, the College of Princeton in New Jersey recognized Cunningham's "distinguished labours in the cause of Truth and Righteousness" by conferring on him the degree of Doctor in Divinity.³³⁹ Because Cunningham had published little more than pamphlets by this time, the award was no doubt given in honor of his efforts in the "Ten Years' Conflict." He had emerged as a leading expositor in the Church of Scotland of the history of Reformation thought, having acquired an extensive knowledge of the thought of Scottish and Continental Reformers on the debated issues. It was their doctrines and that of the Westminster Confession, rather than Scriptural arguments, which filled his speeches and defeated his opponents. Cunningham's desire to return the Church of Scotland to its Reformation roots had helped to revive the Church, but it had also helped to bring about the end of the Established relationship for the vast majority of Evangelicals who had labored with him during the "Ten Years' Conflict."

³³⁹ibid., 182.

4

THE COMMUNION OF SAINTS (1843-1847)

“The Free Church has now allied itself to the great family of Christians who are severed from all connection with the State.”

I

On 18 May 1843, the opening day of the annual General Assembly, the Non-intrusionists were ready for the Disruption that had been inevitable for months. So was the public, who by five o'clock in the morning had filled to capacity the public galleries of St. Andrews Church in Edinburgh. By early afternoon thousands had also crowded George Street in front of the Church—just to witness the momentous occasion and to catch a glimpse of the leading figures of the ten-year-old controversy, men who had obtained celebrity status for their involvement in the conflict.¹ Enthusiastic applause greeted Cunningham, Chalmers, Candlish, and other leading Evangelical Non-intrusionists as they entered the Church.² When the Assembly finally opened that afternoon, the retiring Moderator, David Welsh, Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Edinburgh University, read a lengthy protest directed at the State. He then led a procession out of the Church, which nearly emptied the Evangelical side of the building. Surprised at the extent of the departure, Robertson of Ellon's face, wrote one Evangelical, “got elongated and ghastly pale.”³ No doubt the Middle-Party minister, Norman Macleod, expressed the feelings of many who remained behind, when he lamented that the “best ministers and the best portion of our people have gone.”⁴

The approximately two hundred ministers and elders who filed out of St. Andrews were joined outside by hundreds of ministers, not members of the Assembly, but

¹Brown, *Chalmers*, 333; Buchanan, *The Ten Years' Conflict*, ii, 437; *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland, &c., 1843*, 4.

²*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1843, 4.

³Wilson, *Candlish*, 300.

⁴J.R. Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland 1843-1874* (Edinburgh: T.&T. Clark, 1927), 38.

pledged to join the Free Church. Together they marched, pressed by a large crowd of applauding supporters waving hats and handkerchiefs, to Tanfield Hall in Canonmills, which had been prepared as the Assembly hall for the new Church.⁵ There, in the presence of approximately 3000 spectators, the procession constituted themselves the First General Assembly of the Free Church of Scotland. While the remnant Church of Scotland Assembly meeting at St Andrews Church reversed “nearly everything the Church had done during the previous years,” including the Veto and Chapels Acts, the 474 ministers in Tanfield Hall signed the “Act of Separation and Deed of Demission,” voluntarily relinquishing their churches, manses, social status, and stipends, for an uncertain future.⁶ “They have abandoned,” observed the Court of Session judge, Lord Cockburn, “that public station which was the ambition of their lives, and have descended from certainty to precariousness, and most of them from comfort to destitution, solely for their principles.”⁷

Cunningham was exuberant that the step he had for so long encouraged had finally been taken. He took pleasure in recalling to the Assembly his own part in the controversy:

it pleased the Lord in His sovereignty to give me, unworthy as I am of any such honour, the honour of taking the first step, and striking the first blow, in this great contest. The first overt act taken in reference to this great controversy was, when I had the honour of moving in the Presbytery of Edinburgh an overture, after the decision in the Court of Session in the Auchterarder case, to the Assembly, to adopt a declaration of those principles held by the Church, and which was adopted in the month of May following, on a motion by my friend Dr Buchanan of Glasgow. On that occasion, in the first speech made in this controversy, I stated those great principles for which we have been contending, as to the sole right of Christ to reign in His own house, the supremacy of His word as the only rule of ecclesiastical affairs, and the exclusive jurisdiction of Christ’s office-bearers in the government of the affairs of His house.⁸

Since that time, Cunningham stated, “I have always felt that we needed, not so much

⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 334; *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1843, 8.

⁶Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland 1843-1874*, 38.

⁷H. Cockburn, *Journal of Henry Cockburn*, ii (Edinburgh, 1874), 30-1.

⁸*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1843, 61. Cunningham refers here to the General Assembly of 1838 when R. Buchanan moved to adopt resolutions on spiritual independence.

wisdom to decide what ought to be done, as courage and faithfulness in doing it.”⁹ Continuing, he justified their departure from the Established Church using apocalyptic and pragmatic terms. First, in severing the State connection, they might escape the “plagues” likely to befall the State for its “heinous” dealings with the Church of Scotland.¹⁰ Second, they were safer separated from Moderatism, “the Antichrist of the Church of Scotland,” the “beast” which “in 1834 received a deadly wound” and “in God’s good time...may be visited with a more overwhelming destruction.”¹¹ Third, they had devoted enough time to the controversy over their constitutional rights, and the separation would allow them to get on with the “great object” of the Church—“to make Christ known.”¹²

If the note of triumphalism in Cunningham’s remarks belied his stated humility, it was consistent with the prevailing temper of the nascent Free Church, which held great hopes for the future. “Carrying the light of the Gospel to every cottage door within the limits of the Scottish territory” seemed within their grasp as nearly 600 congregations “rallied to the banner of evangelical freedom.”¹³ Less than two weeks after the close of the Assembly, on 13 June 1843, Cunningham exhorted a large public meeting of Free Church adherents in the Glasgow City Hall, with the same sanguine outlook:

Be encouraged by the conviction, that by ardent zeal and wisdom, and cordial co-operation and united exertion, by making sacrifices of your own ease, and comfort, and enjoyment...that over the whole extent of Scotland something may yet be seen and realised similar to that described in the language of Scripture, that “a nation was born in a day.”¹⁴

⁹ibid., 62.

¹⁰ibid., 63.

¹¹ibid. Cunningham continued: “I do not mean to say that any thing they have done would have warranted us in simply leaving them; because, on scriptural principles, we should not have separated from them, but exercised ecclesiastical discipline upon them.”

¹²ibid., 64.

¹³Fleming, *A History of the Church in Scotland 1843-1874*, 41.

¹⁴*Witness*, 17 June 1843.

To the onlooking world, it must have seemed like the Free Church was a nation “born in a day.” In four years, the fledgling denomination constructed over 730 places of worship throughout Scotland, supplied them with ministers, paid each minister an adequate stipend, and, by the following year, erected over 400 manses. Its newly-created national system of over 500 elementary schools was staffed by nearly 650 teachers and filled by over 44,000 students. Two teacher-training academies and one theological college were established. And its outlay for foreign missions during the first five years more than doubled that of the Church of Scotland during the five years leading up to the Disruption.¹⁵ As S.J. Brown writes, the “building of the Free Church was one of the great achievements of Victorian Britain.”¹⁶

The early successes of the Free Church and their attendant sacrifices drew worldwide sympathy and encouragement. Ministers and laymen from “nearly all Protestant denominations in all parts of the world,” it was written, sent expressions of approval.¹⁷ While these friendly gestures encouraged a spirit of arrogance among some in the Free Church, a spirit of defiance was fostered by other, less kind, reactions to the Free Church.¹⁸ The years from 1843 to 1847 have, in fact, been described as the “time of trial” for the Free Church.¹⁹ In the more remote rural districts of Scotland, especially in the Highlands and Southern Uplands, Free Church adherents encountered fierce opposition from landowners who considered the new Church a subversive force, endangering the social hierarchy and political order. Hoping that pressure would induce the tenants and laborers on their lands to abandon the Free Church and return to the Established Church, some proprietors dismissed

¹⁵Brown, *Chalmers*, 344; Brown, Fry, “The Ten Years’ Conflict,” *Scotland in the Age of the Disruption*, 22-3. For accounts of the accomplishments of the early Free Church, see Brown, *Chalmers*, 337-349; T. Brown, *Annals of the Disruption*, 207-352; Fleming, *The Church in Scotland*, 63-8; W.G. Blaikie, *After Fifty Years* (London, 1893), 52-128. For a contemporary Moderate Church of Scotland opinion, see Macfarlane, *The Late Secession*, 144-74.

¹⁶Brown, *Chalmers*, 344.

¹⁷Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 38.

¹⁸*ibid.*, 43.

¹⁹S.J. Brown, “Martyrdom in Early Victorian Scotland: Disruption Fathers and the Making of the Free Church,” *Martyrs and Martyrologies*, (Blackwell: Oxford, n.d.), 327.

Free Church servants from their homes and evicted Free Church tenants from their lands.²⁰ Free Church shopkeepers, moreover, were informed that they would “forfeit the custom of the wealthy and fashionable,” unless they forsook the Free Church.²¹ Larger landowners even denied sites for Free Church construction of worship facilities. This forced congregations to worship in the open air, causing widespread suffering and at least some deaths.²²

In the rural parish of Canobie, in Dumfriesshire, the Duke of Buccleuch owned all the surrounding land. Free Church attenders there selected a moor on Buccleuch’s property on which to worship, believing that using the infertile land would give no offense to its owner. After three or four Sundays, however, the sheriff presented them with an interdict prohibiting Free Church adherents from worshipping anywhere on the Duke’s lands.²³ This forced the congregation to worship through the winter of 1843-1844 on the only place left—the grassy side of a public highway—exposed to wind, rain, sleet, and snow.²⁴ Reminiscent of the Strathbogie affair, the Free Church sent some of its most prominent preachers to Canobie to encourage the oppressed congregation. On Sunday, 12 November 1843, Cunningham preached there twice. In spite of rain, he wrote to the *Witness*, more than 700 people worshipped attentively as he preached from a wooden tent. During the interval between forenoon and afternoon services, with the weather worsening, the congregation shifted the tent to a position less convenient for them, but one which would keep the driving rain from Cunningham’s face. “It was impossible,” Cunningham wrote, “not to feel indignation at the cruelty which condemned the people to stand on the wet and dirty road, exposed to the inclemency of the weather, but I deferred what it might be proper to

²⁰Brown, “Martyrdom,” 327.

²¹Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 46.

²²Brown, “Martyrdom,” 327.

²³T. Brown, *Annals of the Disruption*, 430-1.

²⁴Brown, “Martyrdom,” 328; Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 46. The Duke relented in July 1844 and allowed them to “erect a tent in a disused gravel-pit.” Brown, “Martyrdom,” 328.

say about their present position and duty till the meeting on Tuesday.”²⁵

That meeting was apparently held five miles north of Canobie, in Langholm, where a local minister recorded Cunningham’s words and the audience’s response. After discussing the principles of the Free Church and referring to site refusals by the Duke of Sutherland in the Highlands, Cunningham continued:

But we need not go so far as Sutherland for an instance of this form of oppression. Your neighbours in Canobie have been subjected to the same treatment. They too have been refused standing-room on the soil of their native parish for the worship of God. The proprietor of the soil expects that he will thus put down the Free Church cause. But it won’t do. The Free Church of Scotland is strong enough to fight the Duke of Buccleuch. We bid him defiance.²⁶

Inhabitants of the Duke’s lands were unaccustomed to hearing the Duke of Buccleuch spoken of in that way. “Some,” reportedly, “held down their heads in fear. Others looked at the speaker in amazement.”²⁷ But once they got over their initial shock, Cunningham’s speech, it was said, fixed their resolve to maintain the struggle for a site on the Duke’s lands.²⁸

The persecution of the Free Church, however, continued, prompting the General Assembly in 1845 to petition Parliament for redress from the grievance of site refusals. A Select Committee of the House of Commons, appointed to investigate the sites question, issued their report in 1847, substantiating many Free Church allegations against various landowners. Most remaining site refusers then gave in to the “discomfort aroused by the Committee’s revelations....”²⁹ By 1848 “the time of trial” was mostly over.³⁰

The persecution, suffering, and even deaths experienced by rural Free Church congregations helped ensure that the membership of the Free Church would not return

²⁵*Witness*, 15 November 1843.

²⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 196.

²⁷*ibid.*

²⁸*ibid.*, 197.

²⁹Brown, “Martyrdom,” 330.

³⁰*ibid.*, 331.

to the Established Church, in part because some Church of Scotland clergy took the side of the landowners in the controversy.³¹ But of more significance was the religious fervor stirred by the Disruption, something critics who confidently predicted the early demise of the Free Church at the hands of hostile landlords, failed to take into account.³² The Disruption marked a new Reformation, claimed those who had gone out, and the leadership of the new Free Church had little intention of returning to the Established Church. They were not a secession or schism, they argued, but rather the true national Church of Scotland. They planned in fact to duplicate the national Establishment.³³

Two days after the Disruption, the Free Church took steps toward the realization of that vision. On 20 May 1843 the General Assembly appointed an Educational Committee with David Welsh as convener. Five days later, on 25 May, Welsh's committee called for the immediate establishment of a college in Edinburgh to provide theological training for candidates seeking ordination in the Free Church. Early November 1843 was the target date for beginning instruction.³⁴ Professors for the new college were announced at a second Free Church General Assembly held in October 1843. Chalmers was to be Principal and Senior Professor of Theology; Welsh, Professor of Church History; John Duncan, "a brilliant scholar of ancient and Semitic languages," Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament.³⁵ And, due to the "general voice of the Church and country," Cunningham was appointed Junior Professor of Theology.³⁶ The obviousness of this decision was best stated by Robert Gordon at a meeting of the Presbytery of Edinburgh on 2 August 1843: "When the idea of a new theological seminary was first seriously entertained, every man that

³¹ibid.; Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 51; *Witness*, 15 November 1843.

³²S. Brown, "The Disruption and the Dream: The Making of New College 1843-1861," *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity 1846-1996*, ed. by D.F. Wright (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Ltd., 1996), 33.

³³Brown, *Chalmers*, 338.

³⁴Brown, "The Disruption and the Dream," 34-5.

³⁵ibid., 34.

³⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1843, 62.

ever thought on the subject at all turned his eye to Dr Cunningham as one of its Professors.”³⁷ Cunningham had already announced his acceptance of the new post to his kirk session on 27 July 1843.³⁸ Although Cunningham personally felt that he had neglected his congregation during much of the “Ten Years’ Conflict,” the congregation of Trinity College Church was reluctant to let him go.³⁹ They readily acknowledged the benefit of Cunningham training future ministers of the Free Church, but “they cannot without the deepest regret,” recorded the secretary of the Edinburgh Presbytery, “part with a pastor with whom they have for a number of years been joined in the closest bonds of Christian communion and love.” They had received from him “a cordiality of sentiment and feeling rarely equaled and never surpassed,” which “was to be ascribed to the native urbanity and kindness of Dr. Cunningham’s disposition—the genuine characteristics of a great mind.”⁴⁰

The new college which Cunningham would serve was just one facet of an ambitious plan to create a national Church. In order for the Free Church to achieve its aspirations apart from State support, it would be necessary to exercise unity within the denomination and to seek it among evangelicals without.⁴¹ Ironically, efforts to accomplish the latter objective—union and communion with other evangelical denominations—would present the Free Church with the most serious challenges to unity among its own membership during its early years. During the first year, for instance, Free Church deputations traveled to England and to the United States of America, promoting understanding of the Free Church, encouraging closer relationships between it and other evangelical denominations, and seeking financial aid for its building fund.⁴² The efforts of the Free Church deputation to America

³⁷*Witness*, 5 August 1843.

³⁸*Ibid.*

³⁹*Ibid.*

⁴⁰*Minutes of the Presbytery of Edinburgh of the Free Church of Scotland*, 2 August 1843.

⁴¹For examples of the stress on internal unity, see *Witness*, 17 June 1843; *Proceedings of the Free Church, October 1843*, 129-138; N.L. Walker, *Chapters from the History of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, [1895]), 67.

⁴²*Free Church Magazine*, i (January 1844), 16; *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1844, 71;

would result in the most publicized controversy in the Church's young life. Because Cunningham did not have to begin teaching until the session of 1844-45, he was to go to the United States as leader of the Free Church deputation. Much sympathy existed there for this new church which had sacrificed material comfort for the principles of orthodox Presbyterianism, and Americans had already sent fraternal greetings and offers of financial aid.⁴³

Before Cunningham sailed for America, he experienced an event of great sorrow—the death of a child. Married for nine years, Cunningham was now the father of five children. During the autumn, hooping cough spread through the family, threatening to claim the life of his oldest daughter. She recovered, but Cunningham's four-year-old son, Willie, also became ill. Though at first he seemed to have only a minor case, the illness continued for some time.⁴⁴ Cunningham's wife, Janet, became apprehensive, but Cunningham was not worried, fully expecting Willie to recover.⁴⁵ During a doctor's visit, however, and without any warning, Willie suddenly died. His death came as a shock to Cunningham. He deeply felt the loss. Nearly thirty years later, wrote Cunningham's biographer, "friends speak still...of the greatness of Cunningham's grief."⁴⁶

Witness, 27 January 1844; Robert F. Burns, *Life and Times of the Rev. R. Burns, D.D.* (Toronto, 1871), 176. For one of the delegation's detailed account of his trip, see G. Lewis, *Impressions of America and the American Churches* (Edinburgh, 1845). This was not the first time aid had been sought from across the Atlantic. When New Jersey College, later Princeton College, needed funds for a new building, "Presbyterian ministers Gilbert Tennent and Samuel Davies crossed the stormy Atlantic to spend part of 1754 in Great Britain appealing for aid. They were well-received by...the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning 1812-1868*, i (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 6.

⁴³*Proceedings of the Free Church*, October 1843, 62; *Witness*, 14 February 1844; C. Duncan Rice, "The Forties: The Scottish Churches and the Southern Slave," *The Scots Abolitionists 1833-1861* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1981) 126; Burns, *Burns*, 175. The other members of the delegation were Robert Burns, parish minister of Paisley, George Lewis, parish minister of Ormiston, William Chalmers, son of Thomas Chalmers, and Robert Ferguson, a Dundee merchant.

⁴⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 204.

⁴⁵James Bonar to [John Bonar], n.d. (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 113-4).

⁴⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 204.

II

In December, despite the recent death of his son, Cunningham sailed for the United States. On 5 December 1843, just before setting sail from Liverpool, he wrote his family, telling them that he was to have dinner that day with friends. "And then," he continued, "I commit myself to the ocean under the guidance and protection of him who holdeth the winds in the hollow of his hand and stilleth the raging of the sea and whose eyes are over the whole earth."⁴⁷ Cunningham arrived in New York on Wednesday, 20 December. Five days later he addressed a large gathering of Presbyterian ministers, representing several Presbyterian denominations. The meeting, which offered those gathered the opportunity to welcome Cunningham and to learn from him the purpose of his visit, took place in the Mission Rooms of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions.⁴⁸ After stating the objects of his trip, Cunningham was asked if American Churches, most of which were committed to the voluntary principle of financial support, could contribute to the Free Church on the understanding that there would be no further connection between the Free Church and the State. Cunningham's response was telling of a new attitude already developing within the Free Church. There was, he insisted, "not the least probability of any such connection."⁴⁹ "There were," he continued, "serious obstacles in the way of entertaining any such proposal, and those obstacles were increasing every day."⁵⁰ His answer did not satisfy everyone present, however. What if, someone asked, the British Government should concede all that the Free Church wanted? Would they return to State connection? Cunningham's response, as reported in the *New York Observer*, revealed the extent to which he and others in the seven-month-old Church already valued evangelical unity over the State connection:

⁴⁷W. Cunningham to Family, 5 December 1843 (NLS, MS 7179, fol 17).

⁴⁸W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 December 1843 (NCL, CHA 4.307.55, fols. 108-9).

⁴⁹*Witness*, 27 January 1844.

⁵⁰*ibid.*

...the Free Church has now allied itself to the great family of Christians who are severed from all connection with the State, and he was confident that his brethren would never consent to accept anything at the hands of the State that would give one denomination the preference over another. They were now dissenters, they had joined that brotherhood, and there they should abide. He did not believe that there was the most remote prospect of their ever changing that position.⁵¹

Although Cunningham qualified his profession by stating that the Free Church could, under the conditions named, receive financial aid from the State without “the least loss of liberty or sacrifice of principle,” the general tenor of his answer came as a surprise to those present.⁵² Pleased that his views were in overall agreement with their own, they agreed to commend Cunningham to the American Churches and determined, to that end, to hold four public meetings in New York the following week.⁵³

Cunningham soon realized that his comments, as reported in the *New York Observer*, amounted to a public announcement that the Free Church was now committed to the voluntary position, contrary to Chalmers’s proclamation in the first Free Church General Assembly several months earlier that they were not Voluntaries. In a carefully worded statement to the *Observer*, Cunningham rephrased the Church’s stance with regard to the Establishment principle. Nonetheless, this new written statement was close enough to his previous oral statement that the American Churches accepted the explanation.⁵⁴ By 2 March 1844, however, the *Witness*, which had been reporting Cunningham’s United States speeches, felt it necessary to state that the Free Church was still committed to the Establishment principle.⁵⁵ Cunningham would himself later defend his statements regarding national establishments. Upon his return to Edinburgh in May 1844, he addressed the Free

⁵¹ibid.

⁵²ibid.

⁵³ibid.

⁵⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, Appendix B, 514-5.

⁵⁵See editorial column, *Witness*, 2 March 1844. The *Witness* did not, however, criticize Cunningham for his public statements. For meetings covered, see *Witness*, 27 January 1844, 14 February 1844, 21 February 1844.

Church General Assembly:

I need scarcely say, that neither I nor any of my colleagues ever concealed or compromised our principles in regard to this matter, though, from their not being so familiar as we are with some of our distinctions, ... our sentiments were on some occasions somewhat misunderstood and misrepresented.⁵⁶

Cunningham continued his appeals for American support in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, Richmond, and other cities throughout the states of the Middle Atlantic and upper South—delivering the main address at each of nearly forty meetings and preaching in numerous pulpits—usually three times a Sunday.⁵⁷ He was well received not only by Old School and New School Presbyterians, but also by Methodists, Baptists, and Congregationalists.⁵⁸ In his many addresses, Cunningham covered the history of the “Ten Years’ Conflict,” vigorously expounding the various Acts of Parliament and the Claim of Right. He also detailed the persecution of Free Church adherents by the larger landowners, always concluding his speeches with the same emotive illustration, probably chosen to appeal to democratic, anti-aristocratic sentiment in the American republic.⁵⁹ In the village of Penpont, Dumfriesshire, an area mostly owned by the Duke of Buccleuch, lived a poor woman, Janet Fraser, who had a small cottage and garden. After the Duke refused a site on which the Free Church could erect a church building, she offered her property. When word of this reached the Duke, he sent an agent to offer Janet twenty five pounds for her land. She turned the offer down. The offer doubled. To this higher amount, Janet Fraser

⁵⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1844, 68. In truth, by the summer of 1844, a growing tendency towards Voluntaryism within the Free Church would make itself known. Brown, *Chalmers*, 347.

⁵⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 204; W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 December 1843 (NCL, CHA 4.307.55, fols. 108-9); Calhoun, *Princeton*, 272.

⁵⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 204; W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 December 1843 (NCL, CHA 4.307.55, fols. 108-9); W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 27 January 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.719, fols. 70-1).

⁵⁹Burns, *Burns*, 179; Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 48; *Proceedings of the Free Church*, May 1844, 73.

declared “that she had given it the Lord, and would not recall it for all the dukedom of Queensberry.”⁶⁰ One of Cunningham’s colleagues noted the response of the audience:

On such occasion the starched features of our dear American friends were pleasantly relaxed into something not unlike a laugh by the exciting contrast betwixt the outgoings of a massive intellect and the playings of fancy around the circle of a “good story.”⁶¹

Cunningham evidently convinced the American Churches of the Free Church plight. One person sent him home with a gift for Janet Fraser; another, as related by Cunningham, asked, “Why do not your whole 700 congregations come out here in a body, and settle in some of our western states?”⁶²

Cunningham had not gone to America just to make known the cause of the Free Church, nor merely to seek financial aid for its building fund. He also desired to gather information about theological education from American seminaries, to use in the development of New College.⁶³ Especially interested in Presbyterian Princeton, the bastion of Calvinistic orthodoxy in America, Cunningham paid three visits to the school, the first during the second week of his trip to America.⁶⁴ There, he wrote to Chalmers, he very much enjoyed his discussions with the theological professors,⁶⁵ to his wife, Cunningham wrote that he was staying with “a very admirable and estimable man”—Charles Hodge, who held the chair of Exegetical and Didactic Theology.⁶⁶

⁶⁰Blaikie, *After Fifty Years*, 47. The Free Church did construct a Church building on her tiny plot of land, in a curious oblong shape which followed the lines of her property. The Church apparently still stands.

⁶¹Burns, *Burns*, 179.

⁶²*Proceedings of the Free Church*, May 1844, 73.

⁶³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 202-3. The new college of the Free Church took on the name, “New College.”

⁶⁴Calhoun, *Princeton*, 272; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 205; W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 December 1843 (NCL, CHA 4.307.55, fols. 108-9). For a helpful essay on Princeton thought, see Mark A. Noll, “The Princeton Theology,” *Reformed Theology in America: A History of its Modern Development* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 15-35.

⁶⁵W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 30 December 1843 (NCL, CHA 4.307.55, fols. 108-9).

⁶⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 205. For a helpful essay on Hodge, see David F. Wells, “Charles Hodge,” *Reformed Theology in America*, 36-59.

Joseph Addison Alexander, professor of Oriental and Biblical Literature, recorded his observations of that first meeting between the two theologians:

You know brother Hodge is one of the most reserved of men, nor is a first acquaintance with him generally very assuring or attractive to strangers. But I remarked with what warmth and cordiality he met Dr Cunningham, as if he had met an old friend from whom he had been long separated. And it was so with Cunningham too. The two greatest theologians of the age were at once friends and brothers. They seemed at once to read and know each the other's great and noble mind.⁶⁷

Hodge's later recounting of that same meeting corroborates Alexander's account. He described Cunningham as:

a man whom you knew well as soon as you knew him at all. ... I do not recollect of ever having met any one to whom I was so much drawn, and for whom I entertained so high a respect and so warm a regard as I did for him, on such a short acquaintance. His strength of intellect and force of character were manifest at first sight. With this strength was combined a winning gentleness of spirit and manner in private social intercourse. It was, however, seen to be the gentleness of the lion in repose. His visit was one of those sunny spots on which, whenever I look back on my life, my eyes rest with delight.⁶⁸

Archibald Alexander Hodge, Charles's son, remembered "those...days, the pleased excitement of our father, as he lay back upon his easy chair listening to Dr.

Cunningham as he strode gesticulating through the study with his long arms laying down the principles and narrating the story of the great Free-Church Exodus...."⁶⁹

The two men became lasting and loyal friends. Cunningham later maintained that he had more confidence in the theological opinions of Charles Hodge than those of any other living theologian.⁷⁰

In addition to visiting Princeton, Cunningham traveled to Harvard College, founded in 1638 by New England Congregationalists, and Andover Theological

⁶⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 206.

⁶⁸ibid.

⁶⁹Calhoun, *Princeton*, 273.

⁷⁰ibid.

Seminary, founded in 1808 by an alliance of New England's Trinitarian Congregationalists protesting Harvard College's drift toward Unitarianism.⁷¹ On 24 March 1844 Cunningham preached twice to the students at Andover.⁷² He also met with the school's brilliant Professor of Biblical Literature, Moses Stuart, who told Cunningham that he considered the Disruption the "most important event that had taken place since the Reformation because it brought out the supremacy of Christ and the supremacy of the bible in a way peculiarly fitted to arrest and to secure the attention of the Christian world."⁷³

America's high opinion of the Disruption opened many doors for Cunningham, not only in the Church. While in Washington, Cunningham received an invitation to address Congress. Although he accepted, a severe attack of rheumatism in his lower back kept him from making the appearance before Congress as scheduled on 10 March 1844.⁷⁴ He was, however, able to attend a presidential reception and, in a letter to Chalmers, reported that he "had a good deal of conversation with Daniel Webster who is generally regarded as the ablest man and the greatest statesman in this country."⁷⁵ The reception took place beside the Potomac River, near Mount Vernon, the residence of America's first president, George Washington. In a letter home, Cunningham contrasted Washington to British rulers: "He was undoubtedly one of the noblest and purest characters recorded in history, and immeasurably superior to the common herd of kings and conquerors."⁷⁶

From Washington, Cunningham traveled to Richmond, Virginia. This was his

⁷¹W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7); M.A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1992), 185-6; 44; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), 17.

⁷²*Free Church Magazine*, June 1844, 161; W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7).

⁷³W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7).

⁷⁴W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7).

⁷⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 209; W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7).

⁷⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 209.

only trip into the South, having originally planned to tour only the Northern and Middle Atlantic states. After several weeks in America, moreover, Cunningham had become wary of indiscriminately accepting financial aid in the South, as some of that aid would inevitably come from slaveholders. He, in fact, opposed the desire of other Free Church delegates to venture southward. This was in part because some of the Free Church party felt a need to testify against slavery, and Cunningham did not want to become embroiled in the abolitionist conflict. Robert Burns, Free Church minister of Paisley, traveled with Cunningham from early February to early April. His practice of decrying the ills of American slavery while seeking American financial aid provoked the frequent admonition from Cunningham “*of the duty of being swift to hear, and slow to speak.*”⁷⁷ George Lewis, Free Church minister of Ormiston, spent much of his time in the Southern states, in spite of Cunningham’s advice to the contrary. Cunningham had no desire to alienate the American Churches, many of which were conservative in their stance towards slavery. Their primary aim, he reminded both of his fellow delegates, was to collect financial aid for the building fund, not to rebuke their “kind cousins.” Moreover, he almost prophetically warned them, “there was something hazardous in the thing.”⁷⁸

While Cunningham was urging quiet on the subject of slavery on one side of the Atlantic, Candlish was drawing attention to it on the other. On Friday, 29 March 1844, a public meeting was held at the Music Hall in Edinburgh to protest the death sentence of John L. Brown in South Carolina for aiding the attempted escape of his slave mistress.⁷⁹ In moving the third resolution against the sentence, Candlish labeled slavery and slaveholding as sin, stated that his blood ran cold at the instance of an American presbytery justifying slavery as biblical, committed himself to calling the attention of the Free Church to the subject of slavery, and hinted that if after friendly

⁷⁷Burns, *Burns*, 176-8; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 210-12.

⁷⁸Burns, *Burns*, 178.

⁷⁹*Witness*, 30 March 1844; C. Duncan Rice, “The Scottish Factor in the Fight Against American Slavery, 1830-1870” (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1969), 284.

remonstrances, the American churches continued to “tolerate slavery by admitting slaveholders to their communion,” fellowship from these churches should be withdrawn.⁸⁰ The Edinburgh meeting was part of a vocal British response, which commanded the attention of South Carolinians. Brown’s sentence was commuted to whipping, but Candlish’s remarks were not appreciated by some American Free Church supporters. On 24 May 1844, Thomas Smyth, minister of the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, South Carolina addressed a friendly but cautionary letter to Chalmers. Smyth, an important figure in the development of a theological justification of slavery in the Old South, informed Chalmers that he was sending further financial aid to the Free Church, but that the “course pursued by Dr. Candlish...[and] the sentiments ascribed to him have given me much distress.”⁸¹

Smyth was not alone in his concern about Free Church sentiment regarding slavery in the United States. Perplexed Americans, including Church sessions, began writing to Cunningham, complaining about Burns’s declamations about slavery.⁸² Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, an Old School Presbyterian minister with whom Cunningham had resided in Baltimore in mid-February, wrote Cunningham on 24 April 1844, urging him not to speak out strongly against the American Churches and their relationship to slavery upon his return to Edinburgh:

We have quietly dropped all intercourse with the Congregational Union of England and Wales, and refused to answer the letters of the United Secession Church of Scotland....And what good has it done to them, or produced to us, that they made their company so offensive to us that we cut their acquaintance? And what is to be gained by an explosion between us and you? All this I urge, even supposing there is nothing to say for ourselves or against our friends and enemies in Britain. And I am sure you will believe my only reason for saying it at all, is a strong desire to see the bonds which unite us to you made stronger instead of weaker.⁸³

⁸⁰ *Witness*, 30 March 1844.

⁸¹ W.P. and F.J. Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison 1805-1879, The Story of his Life Told by his Children*, iii, 1841-1860 (London, 1889), 151-2; George Shepperson, “Thomas Chalmers, the Free Church of Scotland, and the South,” *The Journal of Southern History*, xvii (November 1951), 521, 523.

⁸² Rainy, *Cunningham*, 211.

⁸³ Cunningham, *Rainy*, 213.

Some Americans, on the other hand, began sounding the alarm as they grew concerned about Free Church endeavors to collect financial aid from congregations which included slaveholding members. On 24 March 1844, Burns received a visit from one of the Tappan brothers, representing the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society (AFASS), seeking an explanation of the Free Church's actions on American soil, especially in the South.⁸⁴ This meeting was no doubt communicated to Cunningham, with whom Burns was traveling at the time. About the same time, one of the anti-slavery societies, presumably the AFASS, approached Cunningham as well, seeking the names of the other members of the Free Church delegation.⁸⁵ One week after meeting with Burns, on 2 April, Tappan and the Executive Committee of the AFASS addressed a stinging rebuke to the Free Church, accusing it of accepting "adulterous silver" to "lay the foundations of FREE Churches," virtually sanctioning slavery by accepting "slave-holders' bounty."⁸⁶ The letter concluded by imploring the Free Church to discontinue fellowship with slaveholders as if they were not Christians.⁸⁷

Cunningham and his delegation had somewhat unwittingly landed in the middle of an escalating battle between the forces for and against American slavery. Abolition, one of the reforms inspired in the North by the revivalism of the Second Great Awakening, became increasingly characterized in the 1830s by aggressive attacks on the South for its equivocal stance on slavery. This in turn hardened the socially conservative South against the abolitionist movement and led to the construct of a

⁸⁴Burns, *Burns*, 178. It is not recorded which brother, Arthur or Lewis Tappan visited Burns. George Lewis, another member of the Free Church deputation to America, traveled extensively in the Southern states, including Georgia and South Carolina, where he met with Thomas Smyth and James H. Thornwell. Upon his return to Scotland, he wrote *Impressions of America and the American Churches*, based on the journal he kept during his time in America.

⁸⁵*The Free Church and Her Accusers in the Matter of American Slavery* (Edinburgh, 1846), 22.

⁸⁶*Letter from the Executive Committee of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society to the Commissioners of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1844), 4, 8.

⁸⁷*ibid.*, 8. 500 copies of the letter would be distributed outside the Free Church General Assembly in Canonmills during May. Rice, "The Scottish Factor," 285.

theological defense of the institution of slavery by Southern ministers.⁸⁸ The one group trying to abolish and the other trying to preserve slavery were now at a standoff, neither having the upper hand. Abolitionists were, therefore, abnormally sensitive to European opinion, especially that of Britain.⁸⁹ The American abolitionist, Wendell Phillips, had made this point through a letter in 1839 to the Fifth Annual Meeting of the Glasgow Emancipation Society, the center of anti-slavery activity in Scotland. "I hardly exaggerate," he wrote, "when I say that the sympathy and brotherly appeals of British Christians are the sheet-anchor of our cause."⁹⁰ Not only was British opinion in general respected, but in evangelical circles, the Free Church was highly esteemed. As Lewis Tappan put it, the Free Church's acceptance of Southern money would be enough to "paralyze" abolitionist efforts.⁹¹

With pressure mounting from those on both sides of the slavery issue, Cunningham also received letters from Scotland urging him "most strenuously" to appear at the ensuing Free Church General Assembly.⁹² On 29 March 1844, Cunningham wrote Chalmers informing him that he intended to leave for Scotland on 1 May in order to be present at the Assembly. There is no evidence that he was concerned over the effects of the slavery conflict on his mission. "I do not think," he wrote, "that my staying a month or six weeks longer would be of much importance in a pecuniary point of view...."⁹³ Arriving in Edinburgh on 16 May 1844, Cunningham appeared at the Assembly just after the commencement of the evening meeting on 18 May 1844, when he was enthusiastically welcomed back with repeated applause by

⁸⁸Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada*, 315.

⁸⁹Rice, "The Scottish Factor," 277; G. Shepperson, "The Free Church and American Slavery," *The Scottish Historical Review*, xxx (October 1851), 130-1.

⁹⁰George Shepperson, "The Free Church and American Slavery," 130-1. See also Garrison, *William Lloyd Garrison 1805-1879*, iii, 154-5; G. Shepperson, "Thomas Chalmers, the Free Church of Scotland, and the South," 521.

⁹¹Rice, "The Forties: The Scottish Churches and the Southern Slave," 127. See also Rice, "The Scottish Factor," 278-9.

⁹²W. Cunningham to C. Hodge, 9 April 1844. As contained in A.A. Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge, D.D., LL.D* (London, 1881), 355.

⁹³W. Cunningham to T. Chalmers, 29 March 1844 (NCL, CHA 4.312.81, fols. 66-7).

the overflowing crowd.⁹⁴ Two days later, on Monday, 20 May, Cunningham addressed the Assembly with an account of his trip to America.⁹⁵ Though he still accepted the Establishment principle, Cunningham was now more convinced that the Free Church could succeed without Government aid and that Evangelical unity was the key:

I have seen much, yea, abundant evidence, that a vast deal of good, and good in the highest sense, may be done by Churches which have no State assistance; and I have seen much to confirm me in the belief which God's word warrants, that there is nothing to which the energies of the Church of Christ, when animated by the Spirit of Christ, are not fully adequate. I think it right also to say, in regard to this matter, that in the course of my visit to the American Churches, I have been more struck than I was before with the importance of the different Churches of Christ subsisting together in one community,—maintaining a right state of feeling, and a right and Christian relation to one another. I believe that a proper spirit in Churches, and, as a natural consequence, to the Head of the Church, is of more importance in promoting religion than any thing the State can do towards aiding the Church.⁹⁶

“Subsisting together in one community” with the divided American Churches, however, would prove difficult for the Free Church, and would demand a heavy price in terms of lost credibility and imperiled internal unity. The first fissure in the Assembly of 1844 had already emerged. The Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale had overtured the Assembly requesting that the Free Church address the American Churches about “the countenance alleged to be given to...[slavery] by professing Christians and religious communities.”⁹⁷ When the overture was read in the Assembly, Candlish, showing more caution than he had in March when speaking out on the plight of John Brown, successfully suggested disposing of the overture by the appointment of a committee, with Cunningham as advisor. To this, Cunningham agreed, opining that,

⁹⁴W. Cunningham to C. Hodge, 15 July 1844. As contained in A.A. Hodge, *Charles Hodge*, 357; *Witness*, 18 May 1844.

⁹⁵For the impact on Cunningham's thought regarding evangelism and revivalism, see *Proceedings of the Free Church*, May 1844, 86ff.

⁹⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, May 1844, 68.

⁹⁷*ibid.*, 163.

so far as concerns the taking of any practical step by the churches in America, there are greater practical difficulties in the way of such a movement than at first sight may be supposed. The usual impressions that prevail, in regard to the relations of the churches to slavery, and which are propagated in this country by the party who exclusively claim to themselves the title abolitionists, may, after due investigation, require to be very materially modified. We do not need to modify the feelings prevailing in this country of abhorrence against the system of slavery, but we may need to modify the views we have hitherto entertained as to the relations of the American churches to slavery, before we adopt a definite or specific measure.⁹⁸

Cunningham had himself returned from America with a modified opinion regarding the relationship between the American churches and slavery. He had for many years been opposed to the system of slavery, which the government had abolished as of 1 August 1834 throughout the British empire.⁹⁹ In May 1835, for example, he and other Church of Scotland ministers had facilitated the publication in Britain of a book by the American minister George Bourne, entitled, *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*. The book attacked American slavery in general and strongly criticized the Church, recommending excommunication for every slaveholder.¹⁰⁰ Now after experiencing the American situation firsthand, seeing the relationship of slavery and the Church from the perspective of various Americans, especially those of Charles Hodge and R.J. Breckinridge, Cunningham was reticent

⁹⁸ibid., 164.

⁹⁹The emancipated slaves were, however, subject to an interim apprenticeship of up to six years as a transition measure. Slave-owners were also compensated in the amount of twenty million pounds for freeing their slaves. O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One 1829-1859*, 3rd edn (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1987), 55. Cunningham agreed with this compensation, voting yes to the question, "Ought there be any compensation to the planters on the abolition by government of West India Slavery?" in the Speculating Society, while a divinity student at Edinburgh. Minutes, Speculating Society, 11 January 1827. Cunningham also attended an anti-slavery breakfast in 1834 in which immediate emancipation was greeted with "tremendous cheering." James Bonar to John Bonar, [August to November] 1834 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 67-8). Cunningham, moreover, was one of several Church of Scotland ministers who in 1836 invited the abolitionist, George Thompson, to deliver an address on emancipation (especially of the American slave) in the West Church in Edinburgh. *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 16 June 1846.

¹⁰⁰*Edinburgh Advertiser*, 5 June 1846. While part of the reason for republishing the work was to attack the Voluntarism in America and thus in Scotland (see preface, v.) by showing that Voluntarism and slavery coexisted, it is clear that Cunningham was repulsed by slavery itself and especially the tolerance of the American Church of slaveholders within its communion. *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 1 May 1846.

about criticizing those American Churches which were conservative in their stance towards slavery. On 15 July 1844, he wrote to Hodge:

I succeeded in preventing our Assembly from doing anything on the subject of slavery, except appointing a committee to consider it, and I shall do what I can to get them to do as little as possible. I suppose I must submit to being branded by the Abolitionists as having been corrupted by the money and hospitality of slave-holders.¹⁰¹

Although Cunningham would attempt to minimize Free Church criticism of American Churches, he was not satisfied with the languid response of those Churches towards slavery. "I most earnestly wish, however," his letter continued, "that the churches of the United States could be stirred up to do something more than they have been doing of late years in regard to slavery, at least to the extent of seeking the abolition of what all condemn, such as the prohibition of instruction and the separation of families, for, although we generally profess here to hold anti-slavery principles, I believe that it is these atrocious slave laws and their immediate practical results that chiefly excite our indignation, not only against those who practice them, but against all who may be supposed to connive at or tolerate them."¹⁰² Cunningham, evidently heeding Breckinridge's earlier advice, then added that "I will continue to do what I can do to preserve peace, as I am satisfied that nothing we can do will have any beneficial effect, and because I cannot see that there rests upon us any obligation to testify upon the subject irrespective of a testimony being likely to do good."¹⁰³

After the May Assembly, Cunningham sought peace and quiet to prepare his lectures for the upcoming term of 1844-45 at New College. A friend had arranged for him to use a country house in Penicuik, about nine miles to the south of Edinburgh, for three months of what Cunningham hoped would be "uninterrupted study."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹W. Cunningham to C. Hodge, 15 July 1844. As contained in A.A. Hodge, *Charles Hodge*, 357.

¹⁰²*ibid.*

¹⁰³*ibid.*

¹⁰⁴W. Bonar to J. Bonar, 10 July 1844 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 68-9); W. Cunningham to C.

While there, Cunningham diligently guarded his time from outside interference, turning down even his good friend John Bonar when asked to take a communion service at Bonar's Church in Greenock.¹⁰⁵ In November, however, his quiet retreat came to an abrupt end. Besides beginning as Junior Professor of Theology, Cunningham fell under frequent criticism for his stand on slavery and the American Churches. The catalyst for this burst of criticism appears to have been the Free Church Commission's "canonization" of Cunningham's position on American slavery. On 11 September 1844, the General Assembly committee appointed to consider the overtures on slavery (with Cunningham as advisor) had submitted its report. Though it condemned the institution of slavery "in all its forms" and characterized American slavery "as one of the most deplorable forms of that evil," it called for improving—rather than terminating—fellowship between the Free Church and the American Churches, in order to exercise "a mutually beneficial influence" upon them.¹⁰⁶ When the Commission supported the committee's recommendation, the opposition became vocal. What had begun as a single voice in March 1844 at a meeting of the Glasgow Emancipation Society (G.E.S.) soon escalated into a cacophonous band of agitants attempting to embarrass Cunningham, Candlish, and the Free Church into returning financial support received from American Churches with slaveholding members.¹⁰⁷ Later dubbed the "Send Back the Money Campaign," this controversy, which Cunningham considered "a matter of great inconvenience," would attract "more attention than any other event in nineteenth-century Scottish church history except the Ten Years' Conflict and the Disruption itself."¹⁰⁸

The attention came primarily from two sources. First, from abolitionists deeply concerned at this pivotal time in the battle against American slavery. So significant

Hodge, 15 July 1844. As contained in A.A. Hodge, *Charles Hodge*, 358.

¹⁰⁵W. Cunningham to J. Bonar, 8 September 1844 (NLS, MS 15998, fols. 151-2).

¹⁰⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, 4-5.

¹⁰⁷Rice, *The Scottish Factor*, 284.

¹⁰⁸Witness, 15 March 1845; Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 127.

did American abolitionists view Free Church acceptance of “slave money” that the American Anti-Slavery Society “carried the war right into the heart of the enemy’s camp by dispatching to Great Britain...three seasoned warriors of the abolitionist cause”—Henry Clarke Wright and James Needham Buffum, both from New England, and the escaped slave, Frederick Douglass.¹⁰⁹ These three men began their campaign in Scotland with their old colleague, George Thompson, the British abolitionist who had been instrumental in the formation of anti-slavery opinion in Great Britain. And, in 1846, the most famous of all American abolitionists, William Lloyd Garrison, would accept the request of the G.E.S. and add his presence to the battle.¹¹⁰

Second, attention came from old enemies of the Free Church, eager to return in-kind the blows they had suffered in the past from many Evangelicals now in the Disruption Church. Voluntaries, still healing from the wounds inflicted on them during the Voluntary Controversy, and Church of Scotland members, whose wounds from these men were still fresh, were pleased to find a chink in the somewhat self-righteous armor of the Free Church. Both of these old foes jumped at the opportunity to join forces with the abolitionists in denouncing the Free Church. At a meeting of the G.E.S. on 25 November 1844, for example, four Voluntary speakers were on the platform, only one of which had been associated with the G.E.S. before 1844.¹¹¹ The meeting, called specifically to attack the Free Church, was part of the more aggressive strategy implemented by the G.E.S. in response to the Free Church Commission’s declaration of commitment to develop closer ties with American Churches.¹¹² Specifically citing Cunningham and Candlish, Henry Wright accused them of “robbery and theft of the deepest and most damning dye.”¹¹³ The “price of blood was in the hands of the Free Church of Scotland,” he concluded; “the sooner they returned

¹⁰⁹Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery,” 126-7.

¹¹⁰*ibid.*, 127.

¹¹¹Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 129.

¹¹²Rice, “The Scottish Factor,” 285.

¹¹³*Witness*, 27 November 1844.

it the better for their own characters, and the better for that religion of which they were the privileged expounders.”¹¹⁴

“After this meeting,” writes the historian, C. Duncan Rice, “the controversy maintained its momentum because it had become a battle royal between different factions of the Scottish churches.”¹¹⁵ The controversy, however, was not confined to a battle among different Scottish Churches; it was also waged within the Free Church itself. Less than two weeks after the G.E.S. meeting, the Free Church minister, John Willis, made a motion in the Glasgow presbytery to suspend communion with “pro-slavery” Churches in America. In the end, the presbytery agreed to overture the General Assembly requesting that it consider the question of communion with “pro-slavery” American Churches and that it require future deputations to avoid those Churches.¹¹⁶

In his speech, Willis took the position of American abolitionists, disagreeing with Cunningham’s statements that had appeared in a recent article for the *North British Review*. In “The United States of North America,” an otherwise sympathetic portrayal of America, Cunningham had castigated American abolitionists for their “ultra-abolition principle”— “that slave-holding is directly and in itself a sin, in the same sense in which murder is a sin; and that every man holding slaves...is *ipso facto*, a thief and a robber, and ought to be regarded and treated as such.”¹¹⁷ Cunningham accepted the view held, he believed, by most of the clergy in America, who:

...maintain, that the system of slavery is inconsistent with the natural rights of men, opposed to the moral bearing and general spirit of the Word of God, and injurious to the interests of religion, and on these grounds are anxious to see the system abolished; though they hold themselves precluded by the statements and conduct of the Apostles from regarding mere slave-holding as in every instance, and independently of circumstances, essentially sinful, and on the same grounds,

¹¹⁴ibid.

¹¹⁵Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 129-130.

¹¹⁶*Witness*, 7 December 1844.

¹¹⁷Cunningham, “The United States of America,” *North British Review*, ii (November 1844),

believe that the Church of Christ is not called upon to apply the exercise of ecclesiastical discipline to mere slave-holding, or to sacrifice opportunities of preaching the Gospel and promoting the interests of religion, to agitating the general or abstract question of slavery.¹¹⁸

Cunningham concurred with their position, though he did not believe it could “excuse continued inaction.”¹¹⁹ The “time surely has come,” he wrote, “when the abolition of the slave laws, and preparations and arrangements for the ultimate abolition of slavery, should be taken up and promoted by wiser and more judicious men than the present Abolitionists.”¹²⁰ But his overarching concern for the spread of the gospel and his dependence upon evangelical unity to that end stifled any action he might have otherwise encouraged. The force of his conviction reveals itself at the close of his article for the *North British Review*:

Britain and the United States contain nearly all the true religion that is to be found in the world. They are the only countries to which we can look at present for any vigorous or extensive efforts for promoting the cause of Christ, and advancing the welfare of the human race. On the Churches of these two countries depends, humanly speaking, the destiny of the world....¹²¹

“It is the duty of the Churches of these two countries,” he concluded, “to...maintain friendly intercourse with each other....”¹²²

Maintaining friendly intercourse with Churches in the slave-holding states, however, was something with which not only Willis disagreed. During December and January, the slavery issue became a regular feature of the *Free Church Witness*.¹²³ At the February meeting of Edinburgh presbytery further disagreement within the Free Church surfaced, with the protest against communion led this time by someone close to Cunningham—a fellow professor. On Wednesday, 5 February 1845, John

¹¹⁸ibid.

¹¹⁹ibid., 170.

¹²⁰ibid.

¹²¹ibid., 173.

¹²²ibid., 174.

¹²³See, for example, *Witness*, 11 December 1844, 18 December 1844, 1 January 1845, 8 January 1845, 11 January 1845, and 22 January 1845.

Duncan stated his intent to submit a motion at the next meeting calling for the presbytery to overture the General Assembly to make a clear statement regarding slavery and those American Churches which tolerate slaveholders. Cunningham responded immediately. Taking Duncan's statements to mean the Free Church should sever ties with those Churches, Cunningham stated that "there was nothing in the relation sustained by the evangelical Churches of America to slavery...which afforded any sufficient reason for refusing to hold communion with them as Churches of Christ."¹²⁴

The Edinburgh presbytery deemed the issue important enough to hold a special meeting seven days later, on 12 February. Cunningham, however, could not be present; instead he wrote a letter to the editor of the *Witness*, reiterating what he had stated at presbytery and concluding that the Free Church had "discharged the whole duty which is at present incumbent upon her in that matter."¹²⁵ The presbytery declined to drop the matter and instead set a second date for the special meeting, this time to be held in Candlish's vestry at St George's a week later. Before the meeting began, probationers, students, and others completely filled the room. Cunningham again failed to show. At Duncan's suggestion, the meeting was postponed to the next regular meeting of presbytery.¹²⁶

At the presbytery meeting on 12 March 1845, at presbytery, Duncan brought forward his motion calling for the presbytery to overture the Assembly to state unequivocally that slavery was wrong, to address an uncompromising remonstrance to Churches with slaveholding members, and to refrain from using moneys received from them until the Churches had repented. Henry Grey, moderator of the General

¹²⁴*Witness*, 8 February 1845.

¹²⁵*Witness*, 12 February 1845. Cunningham referred to a letter sent to the American Evangelical Churches by the Commission of the General Assembly taking the same stance as he had in his article in the *North British Review*. For Breckenridge's response to this letter, see Rainy, *Cunningham*, 220.

¹²⁶*Witness*, 19 February 1845.

Assembly, seconded the motion.¹²⁷ Although Duncan began his motion with the “hope that all manifestations of feeling would be abstained from,” Cunningham showed his disdain for the opinions of his opponents, while focusing the issue with his uncanny ability to state the question:

I feel it to be a matter of great inconvenience, and at the same time, annoyance, to be called upon to discuss this subject in such circumstances. It is personally to me exceedingly inconvenient; and I feel it annoying, because I think it is distracting the attention, and occupying the time, of ministers that might be much better employed. ... It is quite plain, from Dr Duncan’s speech, that the main point which we are called upon to consider resolves substantially into this,—Is it, or is it not, a matter of imperative duty upon every Church of Christ to exclude every slaveholder, no matter what may be his character, from the Church and religious ordinances? The controversy turns mainly on that point; and yet, in the course of this discussion, we have scarcely heard a word that bore with anything like directness, or pertinency, or logic, or scriptural argument, on that position. ... [Grey’s argument] does not come within 1000 miles of the only points we are called upon to consider....¹²⁸

After citing legal hurdles which he believed made it virtually impossible for American slaveholders to release their slaves, Cunningham distanced himself from two American positions, put forth primarily by Southern Presbyterian ministers.¹²⁹ The first was that the Bible sanctions slavery. By this, he explained, they “mean that the...example of the patriarchs of the Jews, by God’s permission under the law, and of the Apostles, in admitting them to ordinance and office, proves that there may be a certain sense in which a man may have a sort of property in another, without being thereby necessarily guilty of sin.”¹³⁰ Though Cunningham believed that the Bible did not sanction slavery, he felt that it was no “heresy” to hold that it did in the way he

¹²⁷*Witness*, 22 March 1845. In the 22 March 1845 issue of the *Witness*, Grey responded to Cunningham’s speech, identifying a possible flaw in Cunningham’s argument. “Where shall we find in the New Testament anything analogous to American plantation slavery? The Bible makes man-stealing a capital offence, saying, “He that stealeth a man and selleth him, or if he be found in his hands he shall surely be put to death.”

¹²⁸*Witness*, 15 March 1845.

¹²⁹For legal emancipation to occur, Cunningham stated, slaves had to be expelled from the state in which they served as slaves, and slaveholders had to provide security for their maintenance until the slave’s death. This, according to Cunningham, was “a virtual prohibition of manumission.” *Witness*, 15 March 1845.

¹³⁰*Witness*, 15 March 1845.

stated.¹³¹

The second position with which Cunningham disagreed was based on the doctrine later referred to as the “spirituality of the Church.” Attributed to James Henley Thornwell, Professor of Moral Philosophy at South Carolina College and later Professor of Systematics at Columbia Theological Seminary, the position was summed up by Cunningham as “We [the Church] have nothing to do with the laws of the land, that is for citizens.”¹³² In essence, Thornwell delineated two distinct spheres of jurisdiction and function. The Church, he wrote,

is exclusively a spiritual organization, ... she has nothing to do with the voluntary associations of men for various social and civic purposes. ... Her mission is to bring men to the cross...and then send them forth to perform...the functions that pertain to their social and civic relations.¹³³

In other words, though the individual Christian was not limited in scope of activity, the Church was. Coupled with the *jure divino* view of the Church that was held in the southern American states, this doctrine effectively rendered the Church inactive with respect to slavery:

The Church of Christ is a spiritual body, whose jurisdiction extends only to the religious faith and moral conduct of her members. She cannot legislate where Christ has not legislated, nor make terms of membership which He has not made....

Since Christ and his inspired Apostles did not make the holding of slaves a bar to communion, we, as a court of Christ, have no authority to do so; since they did not attempt to remove it from the Church by legislation, we have no authority to legislate on the subject.¹³⁴

Cunningham regretted that the Southern Presbyterians had “peculiar notions on the

¹³¹ibid.

¹³²ibid.

¹³³L.C. Whitlock, “James Henley Thornwell,” *Reformed Theology in America: A History of Its Modern Development*, ed. by D.F. Wells (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 239-240.

¹³⁴*Minutes of the General Assembly (Old School) 1845*, as contained in M. Smith, “The Southern Tradition,” *Reformed Theology in America*, 199.

extent to which Churches ought to interfere in civil matters,” but no heresy could be charged against them—they were yet Churches of Christ, and communion should therefore be maintained.¹³⁵ To refuse them communion would mean the “prevention of union among the Churches of Christ.”¹³⁶ Abolitionism would then, he continued, have “prevented the union of the Churches in the New and Old Worlds.”¹³⁷

Although scattered voices, like Duncan and Willis, pushed for severing ties with the American Churches, Cunningham’s position had already been adopted by the Free Church leadership. The *Witness* reflected this stance by reporting only a small part of Duncan’s presbytery speech, while reporting most of Cunningham’s.¹³⁸ After hearing Cunningham’s speech, particularly when he argued that there were instances in which it might be impossible or even immoral not to purchase slaves within the American context, Duncan withdrew the last part of his motion, which required the Free Church to set aside the money until the American Churches repented.¹³⁹ Others, however, were not so easily persuaded. Henry C. Wright replied with a pamphlet entitled, “American Slavery Proved to be Theft and Robbery,” citing Cunningham’s presbytery speech:

But Dr Cunningham says, “*The slave laws, beyond all question, are most infamous,*” and then declares, “the *legal position* of a master of slaves is not necessarily sinful!” What can he mean? A law authorizes one hundred men to hold Dr Cunningham as a slave—a chattel. It is certain that one of the hundred will thus hold him. The Doctor prefers to be owned and used as a beast by me, in preference to the others. He goes down upon his knees, begs, pleads, weeps, to have me buy him. I hire the money, and buy him, and hold and use him as a beast. Could I innocently buy him, and thus sanction “the most infamous law” that made him a slave?” “Yes,” says the Doctor, “you only submit to what you cannot help.” Suppose the law authorizes every man in Scotland to assassinate the Doctor. He knows that I am a kind, praying, Christian assassin. He entreats me to assassinate him. So, lest somebody else should give him more pain, I at once strike the dagger to his heart. I “submit to what I cannot help.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁵ *Witness*, 15 March 1845.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *ibid.*, 22 March 1845.

¹³⁹ *ibid.*, 15 March 1845.

¹⁴⁰ H.C. Wright, *American Slavery Proved to be Theft and Robbery which no Circumstances can Justify or Palliate, with Remarks on the Speeches of Rev. Doctors Cunningham and Candlish before the Free Presbytery of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1845), 21.

Wright also took pleasure in highlighting the seeming irony that Cunningham and Candlish refused to have “Christian fellowship” with Church of Scotland ministers who receive support from the State, but had no problem doing so with slaveholders.¹⁴¹

One month after the meeting in March, Cunningham’s presbytery speech also came in for criticism from his old Voluntary rival, John Ritchie of the United Secession Church, who had attended the meeting. On 16 April, at a meeting held for the public in Edinburgh, Ritchie said that Cunningham’s speech had caused him to weep. “It was, indeed,” he said, “a strange thing to hear a minister of the gospel of Christ maintain that slavery was not condemned by the Word of God. Dr Cunningham should have recollected what was written, that Christ came ‘to give liberty to the captive,’ and that ‘whatsoever ye would that others do to you do you so to them.’”¹⁴²

By the time of the General Assembly in 1845, the Free Church, probably motivated by external abolitionist pressure and Cunningham’s counsel, presented a more united face than in previous meetings.¹⁴³ The report on slavery, which referred to the “heinous sin in the institution of American slavery and criticized the “considerable supineness” in the American Churches with regard to slavery justified by their distinction between Church and citizen, nevertheless maintained that the best course of action was to maintain fellowship with them in order to admonish them about slavery.¹⁴⁴ After Candlish read the report, Duncan, now generally satisfied with the Free Church position, seconded the motion to accept the report; Grey expressed his delight over the harmony on the subject and felt the report to be a step in the right direction; and Cunningham expressed his own concurrence. But the report represented a compromise. Duncan and Grey wanted it to say more; Cunningham felt

¹⁴¹*ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴²*Witness*, 16 April 1845.

¹⁴³Rice, “The Scottish Factor,” 277.

¹⁴⁴*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1845, 256-7.

no need to express the view of the Free Church at all and he “hoped there would be no further discussion on this subject.”¹⁴⁵

The report was unanimously adopted, but further discussion was inevitable.¹⁴⁶ Shortly after the Assembly, Wright responded to the report with a pamphlet entitled, *Manstealers: Will the Free Church of Scotland Hold Christian Fellowship With Them?* Wright stated that he considered “each Slaveholder as guilty of all the crimes that *necessarily* belong to Slavery,” thus justifying his use of the term manstealer for slaveholder.¹⁴⁷ “Had there been,” he continued, “as many sheepstealers as there were manstealers in the General Assembly of last spring,” referring to the annual meeting of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, “would Doctors Burns and Cunningham have sat and communed with them as an “*Evangelical*” Assembly?”¹⁴⁸ For Wright, communion with that body made the Free Church culpable of “manstealing.”¹⁴⁹ Far from having the Free Church accept the report on slavery, Wright suggested they refuse communion not only with “manstealers” but also with apologists for “manstealing.”¹⁵⁰

In August 1845, two months after the General Assembly, Frederick Douglass arrived on British soil, stopping first in Liverpool. Having published his *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* two months earlier, Douglass, himself a runaway slave, was by this time a highly sought after abolitionist speaker.¹⁵¹ Of all the abolitionists active in Britain at the time, he was “the one people came to hear—and

¹⁴⁵*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1845, 258. Cunningham may have gotten his way after all. In 1846 James Macbeth complained that the Assembly’s deliverance on slavery had never been sent to the American Church. J. Macbeth, *No Fellowship with Slaveholders: A Calm Review of the Debate on Slavery in the Free Assembly of 1846* (Edinburgh, 1846), 6.

¹⁴⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1845, 258.

¹⁴⁷Wright, *Manstealers: Will the Free Church of Scotland Hold Christian Fellowship with Them?* (Glasgow, 1845), 4.

¹⁴⁸*ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁹*ibid.*

¹⁵⁰*ibid.*, 12.

¹⁵¹He was also, by his own account, highly sought after back home, but for different reasons: “The writing of my pamphlet [*Narrative*]...endangered my liberty, and led me to seek a refuge from republican slavery in monarchical England.” F. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. by W.L. Andrews (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 223.

to see.”¹⁵² Encouraged by leaders of the American Anti-Slavery Society at home and by ardent antislavery societies in Great Britain, Douglass began to stir British hearts against American slavery with speeches of rare oratorical skill.¹⁵³ He was, according to a later admirer, “an orator...the listeners never forgot.”¹⁵⁴

In January 1846 Douglass reached Scotland with a single motive: to change the mind of the Free Church on slaveholders’ money.¹⁵⁵ “Send back the money” became Douglass’s constant demand as he traveled across Scotland. Audiences shouted the slogan back to Douglass; children called it out to him when he passed them on the street; and arriving in Edinburgh in April, he carved it into the turf on Arthur’s Seat, the great crag rising above the city.¹⁵⁶ In May, as a show of abolitionist force, Douglass was joined in Edinburgh by Thompson, Wright, and Buffum, who had also been raising the “war-cry” of “Send Back the Money” throughout Scotland.¹⁵⁷ These men, according to the Edinburgh abolitionist Mary Welsh, “have done wonders in opening the eyes of the public to this enormous iniquity, never was there such excitement as at present.”¹⁵⁸

The fracas, which had been raging for two years, was approaching its climax as the Free Church General Assembly of 1846 approached.¹⁵⁹ Even a Free Church sympathizer, quoted in the *Witness* on 2 May 1846, acknowledged the disturbance. ““Send back the money” has now become,” he wrote, “through the agency of a few itinerant orators who...have this week alighted in our own city, the hue and cry of the

¹⁵²W.S. McFeely, *Frederick Douglass* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991), 132.

¹⁵³These British antislavery societies had continued to operate though slavery had been abolished in the Empire in 1834.

¹⁵⁴McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 124-5.

¹⁵⁵Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 133-4.

¹⁵⁶McFeely, *Frederick Douglass*, 133.

¹⁵⁷*Macphail’s Ecclesiastical Journal and Literary Review*, i (July 1846), 415.

¹⁵⁸Mary Welsh to Maria Weston Chapmon, 17 May 1846. As contained in J.W. Blassingame, ed., *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, Volume 1: 1841-46 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 244.

¹⁵⁹Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 135.

day.”¹⁶⁰ What Mary Welsh described as “glorious meetings...against the Free Church,” were being held by these men as the culmination of their efforts in Scotland, the intent of which “was to force the Free Kirk to send back the money...or to split in two.”¹⁶¹

The Free Church was becoming a “house...divided against itself” in its struggle over whether or not to maintain communion with the American slaveholding churches.¹⁶² One Free Church member conceded that the controversy “may no doubt unsettle the minds of some of our people,—it may even detach some who were not connected with us by principle...;” many of the laity were “anxious to have the money sent back;” some Free Church ministers were publicly at odds with the Free Church position; the New College Missionary Association, made up of students studying for the Free Church ministry, wrote to their counterparts at Princeton Theological Seminary stating a somewhat radical antislavery position; Candlish would soon express his hope to “satisfy the “uneasiness and apprehension” of “our friends throughout the church and throughout the country” who were willing to make concessions to “popular clamour” to get the Free Church out of its “awkward predicament;” and Duncan, who had publicly acquiesced in the Free Church position at the General Assembly of 1845, wrote an approving letter in early May 1846 to Free Church members in and around Dundee who were planning a meeting to oppose slavery and fellowship with slaveholding Churches in America.¹⁶³

By the time of the opening of the Free Church General Assembly of 1846, the new denomination faced the most serious crisis of its three-year history.¹⁶⁴ Though the

¹⁶⁰*Witness*, 2 May 1846.

¹⁶¹Mary Welsh to Maria Weston Chapman, 17 May 1846. As contained in C. Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists: An Episode in Transatlantic Understanding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1974), 261; Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 135.

¹⁶²Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery,” 129; *Witness*, 9 May 1846.

¹⁶³Frederick Douglass to R.D. Webb, 16 February 1846. As contained in Clare Taylor, *British and American Abolitionists*, 251; Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery,” 129-130; Princeton Seminary to New College Missionary Association, 3 January 1845 (NCL, AA3.3.32); *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 15 May 1846; *Proceedings of the Free Church*, Appendix, 1846, 19.

¹⁶⁴C. Duncan Rice, “The Scottish Factor,” 305.

slavery question had been significant in the Assembly of 1845, it was now of central importance. Two days were set aside to debate overtures on the issue.¹⁶⁵ The debate began on Saturday, 30 May 1846, when the hall at Canonmills was “densely packed.”¹⁶⁶ Candlish opened the debate urging acceptance of the report by the Standing Committee on Correspondence with American Churches, which in effect suggested that Free Church policy should continue as before. James Macbeth, minister of the Lauriston Free Church, Glasgow, responded by introducing a motion to exclude from communion with the Free Church any Church in the United States which did not first excommunicate their slaveholding members.¹⁶⁷ Macbeth, however, found himself completely isolated in the Assembly. He had recently published a pamphlet, entitled, *The Church and the Slaveholder: or Light and Darkness*, in which he had urged the approaching Assembly not to adopt the “utterly unsound and fallacious” arguments of Cunningham.¹⁶⁸ Cunningham, Candlish, and other leading conservative abolitionists in the Assembly now ostentatiously ignored him as he spoke, and no one seconded his motion.¹⁶⁹

Duncan, now generally satisfied with the report of the Standing Committee, supported Candlish’s motion with a brief speech. Cunningham then went forward to address the Assembly. Having already been greeted with enthusiastic applause when he entered the hall that morning, Cunningham now received, according to Douglass, who was seated in the audience, “almost tumultous [sic] applause.”¹⁷⁰ Though Cunningham intimated that he need not occupy much of their time on the matter, he delivered a speech of nearly one hour, beginning with a few words of self-defense.

¹⁶⁵ibid., 304.

¹⁶⁶F. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 234; *Witness*, 2 June 1846.

¹⁶⁷*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 30, 33.

¹⁶⁸J. Macbeth, *The Church and the Slaveholder: or Light and Darkness: an Attempt to Prove, from the Word of God and from Reason, that to Hold Property in Man is Wholly Destitute of Divine Warrant, is a Flagrant Crime, and Demands Excommunication* (Edinburgh, 1845), 7.

¹⁶⁹Rice, *The Scots Abolitionists*, 140; Rice, “The Scottish Factor,” 329.

¹⁷⁰F. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 235; *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 36.

...it may be expected that I should wish to say a few words on the question, especially as I have had the unmerited honour of being supposed to have done something in the way of introducing what are called pro-slavery views into the Free Church of Scotland. Of course there is no person in the Free Church of Scotland who believes this. It is perfectly well known to all who have paid the least attention to the proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland, ever since this matter was brought before us, that there has been no real or substantial difference of opinion among our ministers upon this subject, and that, in common with others who have taken part in it, I have never had the least hesitation in openly and fully declaring my thorough conviction that the system of slavery is sinful...because it is inconsistent with the ordinary and natural rights of man, opposed to the general bearing and spirit of the word of God, and injurious to the interests of religion.¹⁷¹

Like Candlish before him, Cunningham stressed the unity among Free Church ministers. Then he belittled Macbeth for airing his differences so “openly and broadly... in the face of the General Assembly.”¹⁷²

The focus of Cunningham’s speech, however, was to put the onus on his opponents to show the “absolute unlawfulness” of continuing communion with the American Churches in slave- holding states. To do this they must prove that the American Churches are guilty of heresy or heinous sin and that the Free Church by its communion with them is “necessarily involved in the guilt of all that they are saying and doing.”¹⁷³ Cunningham then argued that neither of these was true, noting subtle distinctions overlooked in his opponents’ arguments. First, to show that American Churches were not guilty of an excommunicable offense in their inclusion of slaveholding members, Cunningham distinguished between the system of slavery and individual instances of slaveholding. Second, to show that the Free Church was not guilty of whatever shortcomings the American Churches did have in the matter of slavery, Cunningham distinguished between membership in and communion with a slaveholding Church.

To demonstrate the speciousness of the abolitionist assumption of a direct

¹⁷¹*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 36.

¹⁷²*ibid.*, 36-8.

¹⁷³*ibid.*, 45.

corollary between the sinfulness of slavery as a system and that of every individual instance of slaveholding, Cunningham employed the discipline of moral theology:

...there is not a more difficult class of cases in the whole range of moral theology, than the bringing out the whole bearing of the different parts of Scripture that have reference to the obligations of the social and domestic relations (hear, hear). But the Word of God shows us that there is somehow or other a class of cases intermediate between those, on the one hand, which are characterised by external and immutable morality, and those, on the other, which are merely expedient, proper, and becoming, or the reverse—a class of cases in regard to which there are some moral considerations bearing on their general character, and affecting the general duty of men regarding them, but respecting which you are not at liberty to look upon them as involving in every instance direct and immediate obligation. I venture to say, that this is...the case with slavery....¹⁷⁴

In his speech, Cunningham invoked the classical Christian approach to moral conflicts— that of case analysis, or casuistry, a subset of moral theology made “Protestant” by English Puritans.¹⁷⁵ To make sense out of a general principle for a specific situation, case analysis recognizes that circumstances may alter the nature of a case. In previous speeches, it will be recalled, Cunningham had given examples in which it was difficult if not impossible for slaveholders in the American context to release their slaves. Before the Assembly he now offered a hypothetical case to demonstrate the necessity of distinguishing between the assertion of sinfulness of slavery as a system and the assertion of sinfulness of individual instances of slaveholding:

Suppose the Parliament of Great Britain were to pass a law, declaring and enacting that, from and after the first day of July next, all the hired servants in all the families in Great Britain were to become the slaves of their masters— so that they, the masters, should have the same right over them as the laws of the slave states confer, and should be entitled to treat them, with legal impunity, as slaves are often treated in America. Well, suppose that this law obtained the Queen’s consent — from that moment I become a slaveholder. I could not avoid becoming a slaveholder.... This being the case, I do not see that I thereby, *ipso facto*, became a sinner, if I never made use of the power given me by the law to treat them harshly or oppressively, as slaves may be treated, but continued to treat them, as would certainly be my duty, just as I did before I

¹⁷⁴*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 40.

¹⁷⁵For a helpful summary of case analysis, see D.C. Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 138-151.

acquired them by the law.¹⁷⁶

Case analysis also requires the principle of *tota scriptura* (that is, universal norms must be defined by the whole teaching of Scripture). Thus, to take the general principle that slavery is sinful and apply it to individual slaveholders would require qualification by precedents, counsel, examples, and other forms of scriptural direction found throughout the Bible on the subject of slavery. This Cunningham did by referring to the example of the apostles. As a “conclusive proof that there is a distinction between slavery as a system, and slave-holding in the case of individuals, and that a slave-holder is not necessarily...a sinner, I venture to say that it is certain that the apostles of our Lord and Master admitted slaveholders to the table of the Lord, and to all the privileges of the church.”¹⁷⁷ This was more than the British abolitionist, Thompson, seated in the audience, could bear. Douglass recorded what happened next:

...George Thompson in, in a clear, sonorous, but rebuking voice, broke the deep stillness of the audience, exclaiming, “HEAR! HEAR! HEAR!” The effect of this simple and common exclamation is almost incredible. It was as if a granite wall had been suddenly flung up against the advancing current of a mighty river. For a moment, speaker and audience were brought to a dead silence. Both the doctor and his hearers seemed appalled by the audacity, as well as the fitness of the rebuke. At length a shout went up to the cry of “*Put him out!*” Happily, no one attempted to execute this cowardly order, and the doctor proceeded with his discourse.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁶*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 38. Though this example received “immense cheering,” it demonstrates why casuistry is now regarded negatively.

¹⁷⁷*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 38-9. Blassingame, in the *Frederick Douglass Papers*, writes: “In arguing that the apostles had fellowshiped slaveholders, committee member William Cunningham considerably revised his church’s usual line of argument. Never before had any of the leading Free Churchmen invoked the Gospel in order to vindicate communion with slaveholders, lest scriptural interpretation also undercut their principle that slavery was a sin in the eyes of God.” *Douglass Papers*, 316, footnote 12. Cunningham, however, had argued this position as far back as 1844. Cunningham, “The United States of America,” 168.

¹⁷⁸F. Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, 235. Douglass continues: “Now, however, as before, did the learned doctor proceed. The exclamation of Thompson must have reechoed itself a thousand times in his memory, during the remainder of his speech, for the doctor never recovered from the blow.” As stated above, however, this type of interruption only encouraged Cunningham to press his point more vigorously.

Thompson's interjection, though halting Cunningham for the moment, provoked him to reiterate and intensify his remarks upon resuming the speech, the reception of which was evident by the spontaneous greeting of cheers, applause, and "hear, hear" that immediately followed.

After distancing the American Churches in slave-holding states from the guilt of slavery, Cunningham distanced the Free Church from the American Churches. This he did by distinguishing between membership and "friendly intercourse."¹⁷⁹ In contradistinction to his opponents, Cunningham argued that determining the duty of a nation with respect to its legally existing slavery determines neither the duty of a Church in that country nor the duty of a Church in another country towards that Church.¹⁸⁰ The determination of a nation's responsibility toward its own slavery, Cunningham argued, was the only issue discussed in Great Britain during the agitation for abolition of slavery in the West Indies. He had no hesitation in stating that it was a nation's duty to abolish slavery. The duty of a Church in that nation, however, was a more complex issue. Even here though Cunningham felt that abolition should be the goal, and that some American Churches had "sunk into inexcusable apathy in regard to a great practical evil."¹⁸¹ Still, this did not provide sufficient ground for the Free Church to discontinue communion with the Presbyterian Churches of America. Although members are in some sense responsible for all the doctrines and practices of their Churches, those who merely maintain "friendly intercourse" with those Churches are not.¹⁸²

Cunningham closed by stating that it was the duty of the Free Church to maintain fellowship with the American Churches. By "prosecuting, in a faithful and affectionate spirit the course we have adopted," Cunningham stated, "we may be instrumental in promoting much more fully than we could in any other way, the

¹⁷⁹ *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 41.

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸² *ibid.*, 41.

general welfare of the catholic church of Christ over the world.”¹⁸³ Cunningham then sat down, “amidst the warm and repeated applause of the Assembly and the public.”¹⁸⁴ Cunningham’s arguments carried the day; no one seconded Macbeth’s motion; and the report laid on the table by Candlish was unanimously adopted.¹⁸⁵

The “Send Back the Money Campaign” had peaked. By the time of the Assembly of 1847, with Garrison and Douglass back in America and Wright in Ireland, Cunningham felt no need to add anything new to the discussion; instead he reiterated previous arguments and took advantage of another opportunity to deride his opponents (who likewise missed no opportunity to do the same). Quoting from a letter he had received from Alexander Duff in which Duff had called the agitation “an ingenious device of Satan to injure the Church,” Cunningham added his concurrence:

I have no doubt it was an ingenious device of Satan,—a device of Satan, not, however, so ingenious at its first concoction; because, in the form in which it came first before the community of this country, —with the Garrisons, the Wrights, the Buffums, the George Thomsons [sic], and the Douglasses,—(laughter)—with that class of persons, the character which they exhibited, and the spirit which they manifested, I think Satan entirely outwitted himself. (Laughter and cheers.)¹⁸⁶

After this Assembly, abolitionist pressure against the Free Church diminished to such an extent that the Assembly of 1848 did not debate the issue further.¹⁸⁷

Cunningham had been a reluctant participant in the controversy; as he had been

¹⁸³ *ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 48-9.

¹⁸⁶ *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1847, 272.

¹⁸⁷ There was, however, further controversy within the Free Church over the matter. At the General Assembly of 1849, charges of “lewd approaches” and “immodest demeanour towards women” were heard against Macbeth. Although “not proven” was the final verdict, Macbeth left for Canada in 1850. Supporters of Macbeth accused the Free Church of trumped up charges in response to Macbeth’s efforts against maintaining communion with Churches in the slaveholding States. They accused Cunningham of perfidy in the matter. Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery,” 140-1; *A Real Statement of the Secret and Concluding Debate in the Assembly on Mr. Macbeth’s Case* (Glasgow, 1849). For the various effects of the controversy, see Rice, *The Scottish Factor*, 342-3; Shepperson, “The Free Church and American Slavery,” 142-3. For reasons the Free Church did not send back the money, see Rice, *The Scottish Factor*, 330.

quick to point out, it was an annoying distraction for him. Occurring during the founding years of the new Church and its New College, the “Send Back the Money Campaign” could not have come at a less opportune time for Cunningham. More importantly, it damaged Cunningham’s efforts to strengthen ties with evangelical Churches in America (to say nothing of his endeavors to maintain unity within the Free Church). But it was also a threat to Cunningham’s reputation. As he had feared, his stance against returning the money made him vulnerable to the charge of “having been corrupted by the money and hospitality of slave-holders.”¹⁸⁸ Cunningham’s newly acquired tolerance toward Churches with slaveholding members lent credibility to the charge, a point which did not go unnoticed by the abolitionists.¹⁸⁹

More than any other issue, the debate over slavery revealed that Cunningham was at times susceptible to the influence of his *Sitz im Leben*.¹⁹⁰ Cunningham’s reversal with respect to communion with Churches in slaveholding states left him open to the charge of expediency. During the Voluntary controversy, when defenders of the Established Church had been quick to criticize Voluntary Churches for their seeking of help from the “blood-stained” Churches of America where “the earnings of slave labour are cast into Christ’s treasury,” Cunningham had reportedly denounced vehemently the connection between slaveholding and Christianity.¹⁹¹ During the

¹⁸⁸W. Cunningham to C. Hodge, 15 July 1844. As contained in A.A. Hodge, *Charles Hodge*, 357.

¹⁸⁹The abolitionist considered by the Free Church to be their “chief assailant,” George Thompson, for example, who had become acquainted with Cunningham during the Voluntary controversy, knew first-hand Cunningham’s previous viewpoint, and frequently cited it in his speeches. *Free Church Magazine*, iii (May 1846), 167. Speaking at an Anti-Slavery Association meeting in the Church on Rose Street on 28 April 1846, for instance, Thompson stated that for more than an hour he had listened to Cunningham, over breakfast at Thompson’s house, “pour out the eloquence of his soul in indignation against the American slave-holder; and declare that he held no connection so revolting as that of a Christian Church with the traffickers in human blood.” *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 1 May 1846. Thompson had introduced Cunningham to the book, *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, which, it will be recalled, criticized the connection between the Church in the slave-holding states of America and slavery. Thompson repeatedly pointed out that Cunningham had encouraged its publication in Scotland, even alleging that Cunningham had written the preface to the Scottish publication. Cunningham apparently never denied his efforts on behalf of republication, but he did notify Thompson that he had not written the preface. *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 5 May 1846, 5 June 1846.

¹⁹⁰The English meaning is roughly “situation in life.”

¹⁹¹Thompson’s report of his breakfast meeting with Cunningham, in which he argued that

“Send Back the Money Campaign,” however, when the Free Church was also seeking aid from American Churches, Cunningham distinguished between the system of slavery and slaveholding, and, citing the practice of the Apostles, declared slaveholding not necessarily sinful and therefore not necessarily subject to ecclesiastical discipline.

In truth, Cunningham’s antipodal positions were not entirely motivated by expediency. He sincerely hated slavery and desired its abolition. He had become irate, for instance, after perusing the book, *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America*, with its graphic portrayal of the brutality of American slavery, and, it will be recalled, had facilitated its publication in Scotland in 1835.¹⁹² But his condemnation of American Churches with slaveholding members had been based more on impression than on firsthand knowledge or theological reflection. Only after his return from America, did his position evidence extensive thought on the subject. While the abolitionists relied primarily on general principles, Cunningham turned to the discipline of moral theology, marshaling sophisticated arguments that steered the Free Church against radical abolitionist demands to send back the money.

Unity with Free Church ranks, however, had not been achieved without great effort on Cunningham’s part. Inducing others to say “as little as possible” on the subject of slavery had been a constant battle, both in America and more importantly back home. Although Cunningham’s position on communion with Churches in the slaveholding States was consistent with that of Chalmers, it was different from that of Candlish, who in March 1844 had threatened to withdraw fellowship from those Churches and

Cunningham had repeatedly stated the conviction that “slaveholding and Christianity were incompatible and irreconcilable,” can be found in the *Glasgow Argus*, 27 April 1846. Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 430, footnote 11. *Church of Scotland Magazine*, August 1835, 278; October 1836, 352. Cunningham, it will be recalled, had been one of the founders of and contributors to the *Church of Scotland Magazine*.

¹⁹²*Edinburgh Advertiser*, 1 May 1846, 5 June 1846. (These refer to speeches by G. Thompson.) Although the publication of *Picture of Slavery in the United States of America* in Scotland was primarily an attempt to attribute the continuing existence of American slavery in part to America’s Voluntary system of Churches (see preface, v), Cunningham was sincerely angered by what he read within its pages.

pledged to bring the subject to the attention of the Free Church. Nevertheless, at the General Assembly two months later, several days after Cunningham's arrival back in Edinburgh, Candlish suggested that they not do "anything hasty" and instead appoint a committee to report on the subject. No doubt Cunningham had cautioned Candlish, as he had Burns, and as he would others, about the danger of speaking out on American slavery. During the years 1844 to 1847, Cunningham, whether conversing on a personal level, advising the Free Church committee on slavery, contributing to the *North British Review*, or speaking in the Church courts, devoted countless hours to building consensus and suppressing disunity, at times castigating friends and fellow laborers who disagreed with him. In doing so, he effectively warded off the two-pronged attack of the abolitionists, who had attempted to force the Free Church either to send back the money or to "split in two."

Cunningham's exertions in the "Send Back the Money Campaign" did more than thwart abolitionist plans and unify the Free Church. In spite of his antipathy for the controversy from the outset, the debate ironically contributed to Cunningham's emergence as the real leader of the Free Church. He had been Chalmers's most trusted supporter and was now becoming his true successor, who unlike Candlish, vigorously defended the same position Chalmers had long held on communion with slaveholding Christians. By this time, Chalmers was becoming too ill to actively participate in Church affairs, and Candlish, at least for a time, acquiesced in Cunningham's leadership in the matter.¹⁹³ Cunningham's more relaxed views on the Establishment principle, moreover, undoubtedly endeared him to those in the Church who recognized the impressive results the young Church was achieving through Voluntary means. There was in fact, writes S.J. Brown, "a growing tendency towards Voluntaryism, particularly among younger Free Church members who had not

¹⁹³The *Toronto Banner* on 3 July 1846 stated that "Dr. Candlish has fallen into the mistake of Dr. Cunningham," referring to Candlish's sudden silence on the subject of slavery. "*Acknowledged Slander*" Again! *Free Church Assembly and Slavery* (Glasgow, 1846), 4.

participated in the Voluntary controversy of the previous decade.”¹⁹⁴

Cunningham had borne the brunt of the agitation in the “Send Back the Money Campaign,” whether in the Church courts or outside the Church doors. Letters, speeches, pamphlets, and placards posted throughout Edinburgh frequently cited his statements and vilified his name.¹⁹⁵ On 23 September 1846, the former slave, Frederick Douglass, spoke in Paisley. Although he referred specifically to the debate on slavery that year in the Assembly, Douglass’s epithet summarized Cunningham’s role in the entire controversy. Before humorously noting the physical resemblance between himself and Cunningham, Douglass acknowledged that Cunningham was considered “the able man” in the debate and named him the “the lion of the occasion.”¹⁹⁶

III

Cunningham, it will be recalled, had informed the General Assembly of 1844 that his trip to America had strengthened his conviction that evangelical unity was of more value to the success of the Church and its mission than was the State connection. Since his Divinity Hall days, Cunningham had held a high view of the unity of the Church, at least in principle. Now, having experienced the financial and moral support of that unity at first-hand, Cunningham’s speech only heartened the desire of the Free Church to develop closer ties with other evangelical Churches. This sense of a growing desire for Christian unity was not limited to Cunningham and the Free Church. In England, for example, the Anglican minister, Baptist Noel, of the proprietary chapel of St John’s, Bedford Row, had been encouraging union among evangelicals since the 1820s. By the 1840s, a handful of Anglican evangelicals and a

¹⁹⁴Brown, *Chalmers*, 347.

¹⁹⁵See, for example, *Should the Free Church Hold Fellowship with Slave-Holders* (Linlithgow, 1846), 15, 21; *Slavery in the Gentile Churches During the Apostolic Age, and the Present Duty of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1846), 3; *Fifeshire Journal*, 27 May 1846; *Witness*, 6 June 1846.

¹⁹⁶Blassingame, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 428.

much larger number of moderate Dissenters were expressing the same sentiment.¹⁹⁷ In continental Europe, Merle D'Aubigne, author of *The History of the Reformation*, and others at Geneva sought to form a fraternal confederation of Evangelicals in Switzerland during the mid 1830s, while in 1842 the Archdeacon of Danzig toured Germany, Belgium, and France to promote friendship among established and dissenting members of different Churches.¹⁹⁸ In America, the Presbyterian minister William Patton of New York, in 1845, with the support of other leaders, wrote to John Angell James, the well-known Congregational minister in England, urging the cooperation of evangelical Churches.¹⁹⁹

There were three main causes of this increased interest in evangelical unity—the recognition that divisions within Protestantism had hindered its mission; a mood of millennial expectation; and the resurgence of Roman Catholicism. T.R. Birks, son-in-law and biographer of the Anglican minister, Edward Bickersteth, described the first cause. There was, he said,

the growing conviction, in the minds of sincere Christians, belonging to different bodies, that their real union of heart and judgment was far greater than the outward appearance. It was, however, almost entirely hidden from the eyes of the world, by the variety and frequent bitterness of ecclesiastical controversies. The evil thus arising was great and notorious, and had a most pernicious effect in weakening the hands of Christians, and hindering the spread of the gospel.²⁰⁰

Evangelicals, many of whom had been embroiled in protracted controversy, were beginning to take seriously the command and prayer of Christ that his followers should be one.²⁰¹ As the Church historian, John Wolffe, has pointed out, they now

¹⁹⁷J. Wolffe, "The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s: An Attempt to Institutionalise Christian Unity," *Studies in Church History*, xxiii (1986), 333.

¹⁹⁸J.W. Ewing, *Goodly Fellowship: A Centenary Tribute to the Life and Work of the World's Evangelical Alliance 1846-1946* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, Ltd., 1946), 13.

¹⁹⁹R. Rouse, "Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate," *A History of the Ecumenical Movement 1517-1948* (London: SPCK, 1954), 318.

²⁰⁰T.R. Birks, *Memoir of the Rev. Edward Bickersteth* (London, 1852), 303.

²⁰¹John 15:9-17; 17:21.

viewed this to be “as much an obligation upon them as the texts which they felt buttressed their denominational peculiarities.”²⁰² This was not merely an obligation, however. It was also, they believed, a significant means to the spread of the gospel. The unity of believers should affect outsiders who would see in that unity a demonstration of the reality of Christ’s presence in the believers’ midst.²⁰³

Secondly, bolstering this desire for unity, was the expectation in some quarters that evangelical union might usher in the millennial reign of Christ on earth. This was the hope, for instance, of James Massie, a Manchester Independent minister. Similarly, Edward Bickersteth urged unity as “a work entirely accordant with [God’s] mind,” during what he believed to be the last days, when Christ would return and the saints would be raptured.²⁰⁴ These expectations emanated from the renewed interest in premillennialism, popularized by the flamboyant Edward Irving in a deluge of books and lectures during the 1820s. Henry Drummond, a founding member of the Catholic Apostolic Church, reinforced its dissemination by hosting premillennial prophetic conferences at his Albury mansion in Surrey during the years 1826-1830.²⁰⁵

Thirdly, the “growing zeal” of the Roman Catholic Church spurred Protestants to “close their ranks.”²⁰⁶ The religious toleration secured by Catholic Emancipation in 1829 was still bitterly opposed by a significant body of Scottish Protestants; immigration from Ireland was increasing, with Roman Catholics flooding into Scotland, especially in the 1840s; and from 1845, the Oxford Movement in England resulted in the widely-publicized secession from the Anglican Church to Rome of a group of High Churchmen, the most prominent of whom was John Henry Newman.²⁰⁷ These events, according to historian J.F. Maclear, “ministered to Protestant anxieties which broke into a storm of protest when the government proposed to triple its annual

²⁰²Wolffe, “The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s,” 341.

²⁰³John 17:21.

²⁰⁴Wolffe, “The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s,” 341; Birks, *Bickersteth*, 356.

²⁰⁵N.R. Needham, “Millennialism,” *DSCHT*, 563.

²⁰⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 252.

²⁰⁷J.R. Wolffe, “Roman Catholicism,” *DSCHT*, 728; Ewing, *Goodly Fellowship*, 11-12.

grant to the Irish Catholic seminary at Maynooth.”²⁰⁸

In 1842, the undivided General Assembly had taken a step toward promoting cooperation among Reformed and Presbyterian Churches throughout the world.²⁰⁹ Deciding to celebrate the bicentenary of the Westminster Assembly in the upcoming year, the Assembly invited other Presbyterian bodies to participate.²¹⁰ The meeting was held at Canonmills Hall on 12 and 13 July 1843 and included a speech by Cunningham, who had just recently returned from England where he had been promoting the Free Church cause. Asked to speak on “the opposition of the Westminster Assembly to Popery, Prelacy, and Erastianism,” Cunningham touched on the three major causes for the increased interest in Evangelical unity.²¹¹ First, he expressed the hope that:

all the Churches of Christ who hold the Head, and are the members of Christ’s body, may dwell together in love and unity, — may entertain and encourage kindly feelings towards each other; always remembering that, as Churches of Christ and members of His body, they have in view a common object,...to promote the cause of Christ....²¹²

Loud applause had already punctuated his previous statement:

And I trust that God will so overrule events, as that we may not...be guilty of the sin and egregious folly of contending with each other. I trust we have seen enough of the evils of controversy among ourselves; and for my own part I will say that I will not be very easily led again into any controversy, unless it be against Popery, against Prelacy, or against Erastianism.²¹³

Second, Cunningham voiced his hope that this cooperation “may contribute to the bringing in of the glory of the latter day,” reflecting the language of those who

²⁰⁸J.F. Maclear, “The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade,” *The Huntington Library Quarterly*, xlii (1978-1979), 143-4.

²⁰⁹Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, 20.

²¹⁰Fleming, *The Church in Scotland*, 73.

²¹¹*Witness*, 15 July 1843.

²¹²*ibid.*

²¹³*ibid.*

harbored the premillennial expectation of Christ's imminent return.²¹⁴ Considering Cunningham's own lack of strong millennial convictions throughout his life, his words indicate the pervasive influence of premillennialism on Evangelical movement toward unity. A fellow minister who later tried to pin Cunningham down on his view of premillennialism was held at bay by Cunningham's response that "he saw nothing to alarm or repel in views which were entertained by some of the soundest among the Westminster divines, but that, for himself, he had not as yet had leisure to look into the matter."²¹⁵ His friend, John Bonar, would later write that Cunningham's lack of interest in the subject stemmed from the fact that millennialism did not form a part of the Reformers' theology.²¹⁶

Third, in accordance with the committee's request, Cunningham spoke of the necessity of evangelicals uniting to oppose error, especially Roman Catholicism, prelacy, and erastianism, which he declared to be "rising in strength and influence."²¹⁷ "Popery" received the most severe of Cunningham's denunciations. It was, he said, "the grand enemy of the Lord Jesus Christ" and "the corruption of everything about Christian doctrine, government, discipline, and worship."²¹⁸ In a stern warning, he told those in attendance that:

...the Church of Christ must be involved in ruinous error if at any time it be brought to believe, that it ought to pay no regard to the schemes and machinations of the Papacy, and to think that no danger is to be apprehended from the Man of Sin. Scripture assures us that Popery will not change, that it must be destroyed. All other Churches may be reformed, but we know that the Church of Rome...is not to be reformed, but to be destroyed by the brightness of Jehovah's coming.²¹⁹

Cunningham summed up the positive and negative motivations for evangelical

²¹⁴ibid.

²¹⁵Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxiii.

²¹⁶ibid., xxiv.

²¹⁷*Witness*, 15 July 1843.

²¹⁸ibid.

²¹⁹ibid.

unity when he reminded his hearers that all Churches of Christ “have in view a common object, and are called to contend against a common enemy.”²²⁰ The celebration had been called in part to strengthen the ties of Presbyterian bodies, but Cunningham broadened the scope of unity in his speech. Denouncing what he called “gross” Erastianism and Prelacy “in the High Church sense of it,” Cunningham went on to say that differences regarding Church government should present no great obstacle to their mutual cooperation.²²¹ This broader vision was reiterated when Cunningham concluded by stating that “the truths to which our attention has now been called, as contrasted with the opposite errors to which I have adverted, surely afford important materials for a basis of union between the evangelical Churches of Christendom.”²²²

It was this broader spirit, as opposed to the narrow intent for the commemoration, that led David King, minister of Greyfriars Secession Church in Glasgow, to write that the Bicentenary of the Westminster Assembly most directly led to the formation of the Evangelical Alliance in 1846.²²³ One of the speakers at the Bicentenary had been Robert Balmer, Professor of Theology for the United Secession Church. His call for visible unity of all who belonged to Christ, first by cooperation in the things agreed, and then by eventual incorporation, so moved United Secession elder John Henderson, that he invited leading men in different denominations to each write an essay on unity. Published as one volume in 1845, *Essays on Christian Union* included a letter from the American Presbyterian minister, William Patton. In his letter, Patton proposed the calling of an international meeting in London to be attended by delegates from all evangelical Churches. The invitation for the conference, he stipulated, should clearly spell out those essential doctrines held in

²²⁰ibid.

²²¹ibid.

²²²ibid.

²²³D. King, *Historical Sketch of the Evangelical Alliance* (Glasgow, 1846), 8-9.

common by all “consistent Protestants.”²²⁴ His suggestion was immediately approved, but because of an atmosphere of suspicion in England engendered by the Voluntary controversy, there was some question as to who was most suited to issue the invitation and to draft the list of essential doctrines. King concluded that a preliminary meeting should be held to develop the doctrinal basis, to which the Anglican minister, John Angell James, agreed, but added that “the state of the parties in England did not allow them to take the initiative and, therefore, the first move must be made from Scotland.”²²⁵ King then suggested to friends in other Scottish Churches that this meeting might be held in Liverpool. This was agreed to, and in June 1845 Scottish ministers and laymen of seven ecclesiastical bodies, including Cunningham, Chalmers, and Candlish from the Free Church, “issued a common circular to the churches of England, Wales and Ireland to meet them through delegates at Liverpool.”²²⁶

On 1 October 1845, 216 Church leaders, representing twenty denominations, began the three-day conference at the Medical Hall in Liverpool. Expectations were mixed. Opponents and supporters alike predicted one of two outcomes:

...either the meeting would be a holiday affair—a shaking of hands, a bandying of compliments, while consistency was forgotten, conviction smothered, and truth sacrificed—or, if the parties assembling should speak out freely, the statement of differences would embitter alienations...till the combustible materials would ignite and explode, to the shame and scandal of the christian profession.²²⁷

Edward Bickersteth arrived with “fear and trembling;” others never arrived, being so apprehensive of the outcome that they turned around and returned home without ever reaching Liverpool.²²⁸ Although there was disagreement, especially when carrying

²²⁴J.B.A. Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain* (Oosterbaan and Le Cointre N.V. Goes, 1968), 20-2.

²²⁵*ibid.*, 22-3.

²²⁶*ibid.*, 23; *Free Church Magazine*, i (September 1845), 313.

²²⁷David King, *Historical Sketch of the Evangelical Alliance*, 11.

²²⁸Birks, *Bickersteth*, 306. Kessler, *A Study of the Evangelical Alliance in Great Britain*, 24.

out the task of drawing up a list of fundamental doctrines, two resolutions helped to dissipate misgivings to the extent that a credal basis for membership was finally hammered out. The first resolution relieved them from any “compromise of their own views, or sanction of those of others, on the points on which they differ;” the second relieved them from committing their respective Churches to the Evangelical Alliance, as it was to be an alliance of individual Christians and not of denominations.²²⁹

The high point of the conference, however, and that which did more to alleviate strife and foster unity than any single resolution or speech, occurred early Friday evening, the last day of the convention. Once the delegates had reassembled for the evening session, the 133rd Psalm was sung, James Massie offered the opening prayer, and John Brown of Edinburgh, with whom Cunningham had so acrimoniously contended during the Voluntary controversy, was called to the Chair. Bickersteth then offered a resolution calling for “humiliation before God and His Church, for all the divisions of the Christian Church, and especially for everything which we ourselves may have aforetime spoken, in theological and ecclesiastical discussions, contrary to speaking the truth in love....” The motion was seconded, and then, unexpectedly, Cunningham rose to speak. “My sole reason,” he stated,

for attempting to speak at this early period of the evening is my wish to say, what I have repeatedly said before, that I concur most cordially in the expressions of contrition and humiliation which this Motion embodies. I feel and know that I myself have been no slight offender. I trust that I have sometimes felt sincere repentance for harsh judgments, and harsh words employed in theological and controversial discussions. ... so strong often are the temptations to indulge in undue severities, and so great is the deceitfulness of the human heart, that there is an adequate call and abundant reason for our not only expressing our regret for past short-comings, but publicly and deliberately under the influence of the feelings we now cherish, and, by the aid of Divine grace, resolving that we will take care again not to offend in this way.

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²²⁹King, *Historical Sketch of the Evangelical Alliance*, 13; *Free Church Magazine*, i (October 1845), 337-8.

²³⁰*Conference on Christian Union: Narrative of the Proceedings of the Meetings Held in Liverpool, October 1845* (London, 1845), 53-4.

Then, turning to John Brown, Cunningham concluded: “and I feel it to be in some respects peculiarly satisfactory and gratifying, that...I have the opportunity of making, such statements as these in a Meeting over which *you*, Sir, preside.”²³¹

The response to Cunningham’s remarks was recorded in the *Proceedings* of the convocation: “The effect produced on the brethren by the concluding sentence of this address it is impossible to describe; silence for a moment—and then a loud burst of feeling, indicative of the admiration felt by the Meeting at the Christian dignity and grace of the acknowledgment.”²³² John Brown immediately rose, deeply affected, and confessed that he too had erred. Acknowledging that even during their estrangement he had never ceased to admire Cunningham, he concluded by stating that “henceforth, I shall esteem and love him more than ever.”²³³ Immediately applause started again.²³⁴ Not only was this a fruit of the convocation, they believed, but “signs of the working in their midst of the Spirit of divine love.”²³⁵ Massie, who had opened the meeting with prayer, later wrote that the “candour and honourably ingenuous acknowledgments of [Cunningham] occasioned one of the most memorable displays of Christian magnanimity and tenderness witnessed in the history of the church.”²³⁶

Those who attended the Liverpool Conference considered it a success—they passed all resolutions unanimously; they determined to organize officially as the Evangelical Alliance in London the following summer; and many remained in their seats after the conclusion of the last meeting, “as if reluctant to quit when the business was concluded.”²³⁷ Outside the Conference, however, there was opposition. The Established Churches spoke by their absence—only fifteen attended from the Church

²³¹ibid., 54.

²³²J.W. Massie, *The Evangelical Alliance: Its Origin and Development* (London, 1847), 188.

²³³ibid.

²³⁴Cairns, *Memoir of John Brown*, 268-9; see also Rainy, *Cunningham*, 255.

²³⁵Ewing, *Goodly Fellowship*, 14.

²³⁶Massie, *The Evangelical Alliance*, 187.

²³⁷King, *Historical Sketch of the Evangelical Alliance*, 17.

of England, four from the Church of Ireland, and two from the Church of Scotland.²³⁸ The Anglican clergy in Liverpool held a meeting the week before the conference and unanimously agreed to boycott the meeting. A paper from the pen of one member of that group charged the Free Church and other denominations represented there with schism and insisted that, before the Anglican clergy of Liverpool would join the movement, those denominations guilty of schism must first “return to the unity of the Church.”²³⁹ North of the Tweed, the pro-Church of Scotland periodical, *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, weighed in against the Liverpool Conference. After mocking Cunningham's apology to Brown, the writer declared that “those who are Sectarians in principle and practice,” are “totally in the dark as to the remedy of [schism] and the attainment of [union].”²⁴⁰ In truth, this attack, which focused primarily on the Free Church, was motivated by more than the events leading up to the Disruption. Ministers in the Church of Scotland had in fact been snubbed. What invitations they received arrived late.²⁴¹

The response of the Established Church was no surprise; of more consequence to Cunningham and other Free Church leaders was the response of ministers and members within its own ranks. At the October meeting of the Edinburgh presbytery, dedicated to furthering the ideals of the Liverpool Conference, Cunningham followed Candlish and Begg with a speech designed to unify Free Church sentiment. After stating that those who attended the meeting ought to take courage from it and give thanks to God for it, Cunningham continued:

As ministers of Christ, however, they ought never to forget that there was a higher ultimate object to be aimed at by all who loved the Lord Jesus Christ, and that was not merely union as far as they were agreed, with the entire absence of compromise on their points of difference, but the aiming at entire agreement on all points. They were somewhat in danger of forgetting or overlooking this, that so long as the Christian Church was broken up by denominational

²³⁸Wolffe, “The Evangelical Alliance in the 1840s,” 339.

²³⁹*Witness*, 4 October 1845.

²⁴⁰*Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, February 1846, 15-6, 26.

²⁴¹*ibid.*, 15-6, 26.

differences, there was something wrong, something to be deplored, something for which to be humbled, and an important object still to be gained. He would farther say, in virtue of what he had seen at Liverpool, that a higher measure of Christian union, might with reason be more confidently expected, and more fervently prayed for. He thought that the Lord had placed them in circumstances, and set before them events, well fitted to strengthen their faith, and to lead them to ask for great things in regard to all matters connected with the welfare of the Church of Christ.²⁴²

Six weeks later, on Monday, 1 December 1845, a public meeting in Canonmills Hall was held to encourage the evangelical cooperation called for at the Liverpool Conference. Although Cunningham was too busy to speak at the meeting, he wrote the chairman of the event, reiterating his approval of the Alliance and acknowledging that difficulties “may, indeed, arise in the way of accomplishing all that may be desired....”²⁴³

The most immediate difficulties for the Free Church emanated from ministers in its own communion who began to express reservations about the proposed Alliance. Objections were being raised in “many private communications” to Free Church leaders who had attended the Liverpool Conference and in “the various Presbyteries of the Church.”²⁴⁴ In a lengthy debate of the Glasgow presbytery on 4 February 1846, for instance, it was agreed, by a vote of twelve to ten, to overture the General Assembly “to withhold their countenance from any scheme for promoting union which would compromise our principles....”²⁴⁵ The objections being raised were not unlike the misgivings harbored by those who had attended the Conference, misgivings which had been, it will be recalled, allayed by resolutions making the Alliance an organization of individuals who, with respect to their differences, were not compromising their own beliefs nor sanctioning those of other members.²⁴⁶

Apprehension and disagreement over the Alliance within the Free Church grew to such an extent that Cunningham, Chalmers, and Candlish invited ministers to

²⁴²*Witness*, 18 October 1845.

²⁴³*ibid.*, 3 December 1845, 6 December 1845.

²⁴⁴*ibid.*, 7 February 1846.

²⁴⁵*Objections to the Principles of the Proposed Evangelical Alliance* (Glasgow, 1846), 5.

²⁴⁶*ibid.*, 11-20; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 253-4.

Edinburgh for a private meeting to be held on Tuesday, 3 March 1846, the day before the meeting of the Commission of Assembly. Discussion was heated and lengthy—apologies were made, and an extra day was given to the debate. After two days, some had been persuaded; others had not.²⁴⁷ Continued disagreement led to what some have called the “first formal debate” in the Free Church.²⁴⁸ It occurred in the General Assembly later that year when Candlish and the Glasgow Free Church minister, James Gibson, made opposing motions. In a speech supporting Candlish’s motion, Cunningham summarized the practical effect of both motions: Candlish’s would have the Church remain silent on the Alliance and leave the choice of joining or not to individual ministers, while Gibson’s would have the Church condemn the Alliance and disapprove of ministers who joined.²⁴⁹ Then Cunningham pointed out the fallacy in thinking of the Alliance as a Church, which he believed answered all objections against it. “The sum and substance,” he stated, “of what had yet been done in this matter was, that a number of ministers of different denominations, and of course differing from each other upon many points, had met together, to consult about alleviating the evils of a divided Church and promoting Christian union...and there was surely nothing in all this to require the Church to interfere in the matter authoritatively....”²⁵⁰ In a warning to the Free Church “in her present circumstances,” Cunningham reminded the Assembly of the unwarranted interference by the General Assembly of 1651 in the affairs of individual ministers, which effectively split the Church of Scotland into Protesters and Resolutioners.²⁵¹ In the end, the motion put forth by Candlish won by a vote of 311 to seven.

While Cunningham and other Free Church leaders were successfully averting an intense effort to end Free Church involvement in the Evangelical Alliance, the

²⁴⁷*Free Church Magazine*, iii (March 1846), 65-71.

²⁴⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 254-5.

²⁴⁹*Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1846, Appendix, 67-8.

²⁵⁰*ibid.*, 69.

²⁵¹*Witness*, 28 May 1846.

Alliance began to encounter opposition from enemies of the Free Church. The General Assembly of 1846, it will be recalled, was the occasion for a convergence on Edinburgh of radical abolitionists demanding that the Free Church “send back the money.” Within a few months of the Assembly the intensity of that campaign waned, partly because the abolitionists realized their efforts had largely failed, but also because they hoped to achieve more success elsewhere. “The fierce storm of abolition agitation,” wrote one contributor to the *Free Church Magazine* in October 1846, “with which we were lately visited has been transferred to England, and instead of being directed against our Free Church, now spends its fury on the Evangelical Alliance!”²⁵²

As early as November 1845, British anti-slavery societies had been attempting to discover what stance the Alliance would take on slavery, since American Christians were to be included.²⁵³ The Glasgow Emancipation Society put the question before the organizers in early 1846 with a tract entitled, *The Evangelical Alliance: Will Slaveholders Be Admitted to Membership in It and Will Its Influence Go to Support and Perpetuate Slavery?*²⁵⁴ Soon afterwards, the secretary of the British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, John Scoble, lodged an official protest with the London Division of the Alliance Provisional Committee, imploring them to deny fellowship to all “who either directly participate or acquiesce, in upholding the enslavement of their fellow men.”²⁵⁵ And in March, after discussing the same issue, abolitionist ministers attending the meeting of the Scottish Division of the Alliance Provisional Committee pledged to change the basis for union at the approaching plenary session of the Provisional Committee at Birmingham.

“Thus,” writes J.F. Maclear, “the Birmingham Conference, the final preparation for the Evangelical Alliance, opened in April 1846 under the new cloud of slavery

²⁵²*Free Church Magazine*, iii (October 1846), 307.

²⁵³C. Duncan Rice, “The Scottish Factor,” 349.

²⁵⁴Maclear, “The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade,” 146.

²⁵⁵*ibid.*

controversy.”²⁵⁶ For a time, discussion vacillated between two positions, some seeking to exclude slaveholders, while other more moderate delegates wanted to avoid antagonizing American Protestants, which would decrease the possibility of an international ecumenical union. At the end of the day the delegates accepted a compromise suggested by Candlish: though slaveholders would not be specifically excluded, “invitations ought not to be sent to individuals, who, whether by their own fault or otherwise, may be in the unhappy position of holding their fellow-men as slaves.”²⁵⁷ Although this course of action satisfied many at the conference, it clearly annoyed Chalmers and no doubt Cunningham, who had for some time been trying to keep the slavery issue from interfering with relations between the Free Church and American Christians.²⁵⁸

By the time the Evangelical Alliance officially convened in London on 19 August 1846, it had become entangled over the slavery question. Southern American evangelicals, almost without exception, stayed home, while the British evangelicals, and the Americans who did attend, were all preoccupied with American slavery. After several days of animated discussions, no agreement could be reached between American and British evangelicals regarding membership of slaveholders. At the suggestion of William Patton, two alliances would be formed—one in Britain and one in America. The profound sense of failure found expression in one delegate’s outburst: “This is virtually a dissevering of the Alliance. We are now to have a British Alliance, instead of having, what has heretofore been the charm and the glory of the whole project, an Alliance for the world.”²⁵⁹ William Lloyd Garrison, who had traveled to London to speak out against the Alliance, wrote to a friend telling of its demise: “What a fact to chronicle in the nineteenth century, that a body claiming to

²⁵⁶ibid.

²⁵⁷ibid.

²⁵⁸T. Chalmers, *On the Evangelical Alliance: Its Design, Its Difficulties, Its Proceedings, and Its Prospects, with Practical Suggestions* (Edinburgh, 1846), 38-40.

²⁵⁹Maclear, “The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade,” 148-60.

have been divinely suggested, and composed of the holiest men on earth, crumbled at the touch of the Slave Power, and vanished into thin air, so that it is no longer visible to the eye, or palpable to the touch!²⁶⁰

Within a few months, the British branch organized, agreeing to exclude slaveholders, which alienated American evangelicals, and the American branch failed to organize at all.²⁶¹ Interest in the Evangelical Alliance in Britain, however, was maintained. The London convocation had not been a complete failure. Nearly a year later, on 14 June 1847, Cunningham addressed a packed Music Hall in Edinburgh on the subject of the principles of the British organization of the Alliance. In an admission of the organization's struggles, Cunningham declared that anyone not anticipating difficulties with a movement of this nature "must know little of human nature and of the history of the Church."²⁶² The Alliance, nonetheless, was "the most important movement to the great object of the Saviour's prayer, which had marked the history of the Christian Church since the period of the Reformation."²⁶³ It was time, he declared, to "do something by union for important common Christian objects, and at the same time...[to] be paving the way for that more complete union upon which the Christian heart alone could rest with complacency, and which alone could be a full realization of the Saviour's prayer."²⁶⁴

Complete union was a noble goal. And Cunningham had earnestly desired to strengthen communion among evangelicals throughout the world. But the goal of a worldwide Evangelical Alliance had failed before it started, and after the early years, support in Scotland became "intermittent and lukewarm."²⁶⁵ Cunningham, himself, seems to have lost interest after 1847. Nevertheless, through his involvement in the

²⁶⁰Garrison to Edmund Quincy, 18 September 1846. As contained in W.M. Merrill, ed., *The Letters of William Lloyd Garrison*, iii (The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1973), 419.

²⁶¹Maclear, "The Evangelical Alliance and the Antislavery Crusade," 160.

²⁶²*Witness*, 16 June 1847.

²⁶³*ibid.*

²⁶⁴*Witness*, 16 June 1847.

²⁶⁵J.R. Wolfe, "Evangelical Alliance," *DSCHT*, 304.

movement, he had expanded his own sphere of influence among evangelicals nationally and internationally. His efforts on behalf of the Evangelical Alliance, making speeches, attending meetings, and especially seeking Brown's forgiveness at a public forum, helped to repair his reputation with Voluntary Churchmen in Scotland. His trip to America and his subsequent stance on communion with Churches in the slaveholding States had enabled him to maintain relationships with American evangelicals at a time when many in Britain were unable to do so. He had also risen to a new level of influence within the Free Church itself, partly through the "Send Back the Money Campaign." At the end of May 1847, Thomas Chalmers died. Not unexpectedly, Cunningham succeeded him as Principal of New College.

5

SEMPER REFORMANDA (1845-1855)

“There is hardly a Popish scheme which Satan could suggest that would not gain the concurrence of the British Government and Parliament as at present constituted.”

I

At the age of forty two, William Cunningham succeeded Thomas Chalmers as Principal of New College.¹ In his inaugural lecture on 9 November 1847 Cunningham characterized Chalmers’s death as “the severest blow” the institution could receive.² This was the second time death had robbed the four-year-old college of one of its professors and the second time it had directly affected Cunningham’s responsibilities there. Cunningham had previously accepted the Chair of Church History following David Welsh’s death in 1845.³ Having begun his tenure at New College as Junior Professor of Theology, teaching *prolegomena*, the move to Church history was a welcome one.⁴ Here he could not only teach a subject for which he was uniquely qualified, but also teach it in a way that fitted his disposition—covering the history of doctrine, polemically describing the leading controversies of the Church in the past.⁵ Consistent with this emphasis, Cunningham preferred the designation, Professor of Historical and Polemic Theology, to that of Professor of Church History. Cunningham continued as Professor after becoming Principal and thus was in a position to exert tremendous influence on the lives of his students as well as the direction of New College itself.

¹Cunningham accepted the position only after Robert Gordon turned it down. Cunningham, *Inaugural Lecture Addressed to the Theological Students of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1848), 24.

²*ibid.*, 3.

³For Cunningham’s thoughts on Welsh’s work and death, see “Welsh’s Church History,” *North British Review*, iii (May-August 1845), 444-453.

⁴Someone in 1843 proposed that Cunningham be given the Chair of Logic. Rainy, *Cunningham*, 222. *Prolegomena* refers to introductory matters.

⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 224-4; *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1845, 217ff.

As might be expected, however, Cunningham's early years at New College were not without controversy. Two of his most significant battles, in fact, would consume many waking hours between 1845 and 1855. The first, the Roman Catholic controversy, was his "favorite"—nothing, he believed, was "more deserving of the attention of religious men;" the second, which later came to be known as the College controversy, was probably his least favorite and surely the most personal of his public battles.⁶ If there were a common thread running through the two, it was Cunningham's desire to foster the faith and practice of the Reformation, both by hindering the advance of Roman Catholicism and by establishing New College as an international center of Reformed scholarship.

Anti-Catholicism can, of course, be traced back to the Reformation, with Protestant agitation ebbing and flowing through the years somewhat in concert with external stimuli. Although the late 1700s and early 1800s enjoyed a lull in activity, the years of Cunningham's ministry, with few exceptions, were times of intense anti-Catholicism. Protestant efforts to check legislative concessions to Catholics, promote loyalty to Protestantism, and engage in missions to Catholics were fueled by theological, sociological, and political factors. First, the evangelical revival, so conspicuous in the 1820s, had heightened awareness of the differences between Protestant and Catholic belief.⁷ Reformation debates, particularly those over authority and the means of grace, were revived. Protestants held that Scripture alone was the final authority for faith and practice. They, therefore, viewed with aversion the Roman Catholic notion, formulated at the Council of Trent (1546) during the Catholic Reformation, that Scripture and tradition are equivalent authorities and are to

⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 313.

⁷J.R. Wolfe, "Anti-Catholic Societies," *DSCHT*, 17; W.L. Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic in Mid-Victorian England: Mr. Newdegate and the Nuns* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1982), 3. For the argument that "particularly during the middle third of the nineteenth century, anti-Catholicism was...very much of the essence of evangelicalism," see Wolfe, "Anti-Catholicism and Evangelical Identity in Britain and the United States, 1830-1860," *Evangelicalism*, ed. by M.A. Noll and others (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 179-197.

be venerated “with equal affection of piety and reverence.”⁸ Inflaming this dispute was the Reformers’ identification of antichrist with the Roman papacy, a position taken up again by Protestants in the nineteenth century. Prone to raise the ire of Protestants nearly as much as the question of authority was that of the means of grace, especially with respect to justification. Martin Luther’s contention of an alien righteousness imputed to an individual through faith had been formally repudiated by the Tridentine statement on justification. This Catholic formulation instead ratified the necessity of human cooperation and the sacraments, condemning those who held that man can be justified through faith alone. Such debates reflected points of real theological difference between Roman Catholics and Protestants, and the polemical approach that accompanied them only intensified the centuries-long controversy.⁹

Second, as Irish migration to Scotland and England escalated during a time of resurgence in the Roman Catholic Church in Ireland, “Rome seemed to lie immediately across the Irish sea.”¹⁰ After 1815, the slow but steady flow of Irish into Britain during the eighteenth century increased to such an extent that by the time of the Disruption, the Roman Catholic Church, a negligible and dwindling minority throughout much of the eighteenth century, was a clearly visible factor in Scotland, especially in the Clyde valley. In Glasgow, for example, during the famine of 1848, up to 1000 Irish migrants arrived each week, and by 1851, the Irish-born made up 18.2 per cent of the population there. Attracted by the industrial revolution and the demands of the cotton mills and coal mines for cheap labor, the Irish migrants, mostly Roman Catholic, often competed with native Protestants for employment,

⁸Cunningham, *Theological Lectures on Subjects Connected with Natural Theology, Evidences of Christianity, The Canon and Inspiration of Scripture* (London, 1878), 450; Cunningham, *Historical Theology: A Review of the Principal Doctrinal Discussions in the Christian Church Since the Apostolic Age*, ii, ed. by J. Buchanan and J. Bannerman (Edinburgh, 1862; repr. Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 480; A.N.S. Lane, “Scripture and Tradition,” *NDT*, 632.

⁹Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain 1820-1860* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 110.

¹⁰Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic*, 6.

compounding an already entrenched sectarianism.¹¹ With the substantial increase in the number of Roman Catholics in Scotland came a rapid building of chapels—a visible manifestation of the fact recorded by A.L. Drummond and J. Bulloch that “the Irish made the Roman Catholic Church in the nineteenth century...by far the fastest growing church in Scotland.”¹² The revitalization of Catholicism in Scotland was accompanied by an increase in Catholic militancy in Ireland, especially by the celebrated Irish national agitator, Daniel O’Connell, and by the enthusiastic hope south of the Tweed that England might be won again to the ancient faith.¹³

Third, an ever-widening toleration and support of Roman Catholicism by Parliament played into Protestant fears that the British political system, with what many considered its inherently Protestant constitution created at the Revolution of 1688, might eventually be subverted.¹⁴ This concern, it will be recalled, had been voiced in Scotland at the introduction of the Emancipation Act of 1829, which when passed actually strengthened Protestant agitation against Catholicism.¹⁵ A Catholic writer in 1831, notes John Wolffe, “complained of the polemical onslaught which was being waged against the faith, on platforms and in the press....”¹⁶ There was a lull in Protestant activity in 1832 and 1833, but it revived in 1834, reached a peak in the summer of 1835, and remained at a high level until 1841. A new wave of agitation began with the Maynooth Act of 1845, introduced by Sir Robert Peel’s government.¹⁷ Peel, cognizant of the fact that despite several centuries of Protestant efforts to convert Irish Roman Catholics, nearly three-quarters of Irishmen were still in some sense Catholic, proposed to triple the annual grant to Maynooth, the leading Roman

¹¹Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 18; Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, 64; T.C. Smout, *A Century of the Scottish People 1830-1950*, 22; Wolffe, “Immigration,” *DSCHT*, 426.

¹²Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland 1843-1874*, 70.

¹³Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 34; W. Ralls, “The Papal Aggression of 1850: A Study in Victorian Anti-Catholicism,” *Church History*, xliii (June 1974), 245.

¹⁴Wolffe, “Catholic Emancipation,” *DSCHT*, 149-50.

¹⁵Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 1.

¹⁶*ibid.*

¹⁷*ibid.*

Catholic seminary in Ireland, and remove it from annual parliamentary debate by making it a permanent charge on the consolidated fund.¹⁸ The new wave of “No Popery” frenzy aroused by Peel’s Maynooth Act would continue throughout the decade and rise to its highest level in seventy years over the decision by Pius IX in 1850 to restore Roman Catholic episcopal hierarchy in England.¹⁹

In 1845, as Peel introduced the Maynooth Act, Cunningham republished *The Doctrines and Practices of the Church of Rome* by Edward Stillingfleet, Anglican bishop of Worcester during the latter part of the seventeenth century. With Cunningham’s extensive preface and notes as lengthy as the original work, the new edition provided a compendium of the disputed points between Protestants and Catholics. Noting its republication, the *Free Church Magazine* stated that “Popery has recovered...and is putting forth perfectly amazing vigour and energy, in the endeavour to resume her deadly power. It is high time for all Protestants to resume their long-neglected controversial weapons, and to prepare for the renewed conflict.”²⁰ Cunningham’s additions, it continued, brought the subject up to the present day and “is a work beyond our praise.”²¹

Cunningham’s edition of Stillingfleet had first appeared in 1837. At a meeting in Edinburgh of the newly-formed Protestant Association, in December 1835, Cunningham had referred to *A Papist Misrepresented and Represented*. This apologia for the Roman Catholic Church, originally published in 1685, had seen nearly thirty editions. Cunningham believed that the book, written by the English Catholic priest, J. Gothe, had been intended to foster Catholic ascendancy in Britain

¹⁸Arnstein, *Protestant versus Catholic*, 6. It is important to distinguish Cunningham’s efforts against Catholicism from the twentieth-century military conflict in Northern Ireland between Protestants and Roman Catholics. Cunningham’s hatred was for the system of Catholicism and not for the individual Catholic, whom he saw as needing freedom from the bondage of an oppressive religion. The weapons of his warfare were prayer and proclamation.

¹⁹Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 1-2.

²⁰*Free Church Magazine* iii (January 1846), 27.

²¹*ibid.*

by explaining “away all that is offensive and loathsome about Popery....”²² Though he severely criticized the work during the meeting, he acknowledged that it was “a very clever pamphlet.”²³ This four-word description, devoid of its context, soon afterwards appeared prominently in a prospectus for a new edition of Gother’s book in an attempt to capitalize on Cunningham’s name. The prospectus, which was circulated “from house to house, in newspapers, and on the walls,” was written in such a way as to make it difficult for a layperson to know whether Gother was in favor of Catholicism or against it.²⁴ Cunningham immediately determined to republish Stillingfleet, which he completed in 1837. “The leading object,” he wrote in the preface, “indeed is to incite to the study of the popish controversy, and to point out the sources from which sound views, and full information upon the subject may be derived....”²⁵

Believing that many in Scotland and America “seem determined to believe nothing unfavourable of Popery,” Cunningham argued that the “point to be ascertained is not the opinion of individuals, but...what it is that the Church of Rome teaches....”²⁶ This could be found in her authoritative standards. After citing a discrepancy between two recent Catholic translations of the Catechism of the Council of Trent into English from Latin, Cunningham continued: “We must, then, examine for ourselves the authorized standards of Popish doctrine in the original language, and not take our views of their meaning implicitly either from Popish representations or translations.”²⁷ The immediate reason to peruse the writings of this debate was to counter current positive views of Catholicism, but Cunningham also pointed out a more general reason to do so.

²²E. Stillingfleet, *The Doctrines and Practices of the Church of Rome Truly Represented*, ed. by W. Cunningham, new edn, rev. (Edinburgh, 1845), 35-36.

²³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 81.

²⁴*ibid.*

²⁵Stillingfleet, *Church of Rome*, 55.

²⁶*ibid.*, 46, 48.

²⁷*ibid.*, 49-50.

There is no department of theological literature which affords finer displays of talent and learning than the controversy with the Church of Rome, and none which furnishes fuller scope for the exercise of the intellectual powers. Many men seem to suppose that Popery is...such a mass of downright absurdity, that it would be mere trifling and waste of time to read, with attention, what has been written for or against it. Such persons, however, only manifest their ignorance, and would be very likely themselves to fall a prey to the arts of Popish priests. ... The subjects of dispute between Papists and Protestants extend over the whole field of divine revelation. In almost every department of scriptural truth, with regard either to doctrine or duty, there is some Popish heresy or corruption which should be refuted and exposed.²⁸

Cunningham not only covered the specific points in dispute between Protestants and Catholics, but also generally categorized Roman Catholicism as the “Man of Sin” referred to in 2 Thessalonians 2:2-13, stating explicitly what others only implied. “Every particular mentioned in these verses,” he wrote, “has been fulfilled in the doctrines and practices of the Church of Rome....”²⁹ Reflecting his own interpretation of Roman Catholicism’s place in the history of the Church, Cunningham wrote that:

When God created man after his own image, Satan resolved to tempt him to commit sin; and was permitted to succeed. Since man fell, there have been three leading forms of the true religion, all embodying the same fundamental principles—the Patriarchal, the Jewish, and the Christian. The great enemy of mankind having secured a most important advantage in man’s fall, has exerted himself to corrupt and pervert each of these forms of the true religion.... Under his agency the Patriarchal religion degenerated among the mass of mankind into Paganism; the Mosaic into...Pharisaism; and the Christian religion into Popery.³⁰

Catholicism, Cunningham continued, was like paganism in that idolatry, “that is, worshipping those who are no gods, or worshipping God by images,” was the leading feature of both, though in a mitigated form in Roman Catholicism.³¹ Catholicism was like Pharisaism especially in:

That it was founded not upon the written Word of God, but upon the traditions of men; that the

²⁸ibid., 55-56.

²⁹ibid., 13.

³⁰ibid., 7-8.

³¹ibid., 9.

true ground of a sinner's hope was obscured, if not overthrown, by a principle of self-righteousness; that personal religion was supposed to consist in the observance of outward rites and ceremonies, rather than in genuine holiness of heart and life; and that to a considerable extent the authority of the divine law was made void by human traditions.³²

Cunningham had produced an inexpensive edition of Stillingfleet's work, adapting it to the present stage of the Protestant-Roman Catholic controversy. Many in Edinburgh believed it to be a significant expose of Catholic efforts to make Roman Catholicism appear more palatable to Protestants by toning down aspects of their theology typically offensive to Protestants.³³ The work was incisive, replete with historical detail, and a reflection of Cunningham's extensive study on the subject. According to his biographer, "Cunningham has not left anything behind him that displays his learning more remarkably...."³⁴

Negative comments in the reviews of Cunningham's edition of Stillingfleet were limited—his occasional "severity" of language or "excessive fear" of the revival of Catholicism in Britain—but a notorious incident in 1836 brought him bad press and a law suit.³⁵ At a Protestant meeting in Edinburgh in 1836, with the Earl of Dalhousie present and the Marquis of Tweeddale in the chair, Cunningham accused Catholics of having threatened to use their growing influence to hinder the circulation of an upcoming edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* unless they were allowed to have editorial involvement in articles relating to Roman Catholicism. He also accused the *Britannica* editors of bowing to their pressure. There were, he said, in the new edition, "plain traces of Popish influences in altering several articles from the way in which they stood in former editions."³⁶ The proprietor of the *Britannica*, Adam Black, immediately sued Cunningham for damages. Having received the information

³²ibid., 10.

³³See, for example, *Church of Scotland Magazine* iv (July 1837); *Presbyterian Review* x (August 1837); *Church Review* (August 1837); and *Free Church Magazine* (January to December 1846).

³⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 81.

³⁵*Presbyterian Review* x (August 1837), 90; *Church Review* ii (August 1837), 435.

³⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 84.

about editorial concessions from an Episcopal minister who now refused to go public, Cunningham backed down, publishing a retraction. "I am now satisfied," he stated, "that the information on which I acted does not warrant the inference that any concession was made, or any inference injurious to the character of the 'Encyclopaedia Britannica.'"³⁷ At his own expense he also attempted to circulate the apology as widely as the offense. The apology of course was cited against him by foes, but as friends informed him of instances of this, he smiled and said nothing against them; instead, out of a kind of self-contempt that arose in him when he realized he had gone too far in a statement, he spoke only against himself. Although Cunningham's foes benefited from the incident, Cunningham also discovered that he had many friends. All the expenses of his apology were covered by others.³⁸

The next year, 1837, the *Edinburgh Protestant Association* invited Cunningham to speak on the subject of justification. In his speech, he showed that he was no mere Catholic-hater. Although the system of Catholicism was apostate and destined for destruction, the individual Catholic was in need of conversion. The Roman Church, he felt, had by her corruption of the doctrine of justification obscured the path to salvation. It is, he said, "the heresy which she maintains upon this subject, which more than any of her other tenets is attended with danger to men's souls."³⁹ Instead of the "great doctrine of the Reformation," that of justification by faith alone, Catholics, Cunningham argued, held to a doctrine of human merit.⁴⁰ With the assistance of divine grace, good works before justification prepare a person for salvation; good works after justification "merit a continuance and increase of grace, and even heaven and eternal happiness."⁴¹ Believing that these views degraded Jesus

³⁷ibid., 85.

³⁸ibid.

³⁹Cunningham, "Justification and the Merits of Good Works," *Discourses on the Fundamental Doctrines of Christianity, as Opposed to the Corruptions of the Church of Rome* (Edinburgh, 1837), 1.

⁴⁰ibid.

⁴¹ibid., 8, 18. Cunningham supported his contention with statements from the Council of Trent.

“to the level of a mere auxiliary in the work of our justification,” Cunningham noted the similarity between them and the erroneous doctrines propagated by false teachers in the Church of Galatia.⁴² Summing up the Apostle Paul’s denunciation of those views, Cunningham stated that, “if you seek justification through the works of the law, or indeed from any other source than Christ, you lose all benefit of him, you exclude yourselves from all interest in the divine method of justification....”⁴³

Cunningham spoke out frequently against Catholicism, sometimes addressing doctrinal issues, other times addressing political ones. On Wednesday, 2 April 1845, one day before Peel formally introduced his Bill to substantially enhance the Maynooth grant, Cunningham supported Candlish’s motion in the Edinburgh presbytery to petition both houses of Parliament against the proposal.⁴⁴ At first, Cunningham had been opposed to this step for two reasons—one pragmatic, the other theological. First he saw little prospect that the petition would have much effect. Second, reminiscent of the Southern presbyterian notion of the “spirituality of the Church,” he was uncomfortable with the Church, as Church, engaging in agitation outside “its own church avocations.”⁴⁵ He felt instead that it would be more appropriate to proclaim their own views as individuals and inform their people of the same. By April, however, opposition to Peel’s measure had increased to such an extent throughout Britain that many no longer viewed the effort as hopeless.⁴⁶ Cunningham now intimated that his objections to petitioning were removed, but, as evident in his support of Candlish’s motion, for a different reason.⁴⁷

⁴²ibid., 15.

⁴³ibid.

⁴⁴*Witness*, 5 April 1845.

⁴⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 307.

⁴⁶In addition to numerous public meetings, 10,204 petitions against the Bill, with 1,284,296 signatures, were presented between 4 February and 30 May. Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 199; G.I.T. Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain 1832 to 1868* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 170.

⁴⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 307-8.

I cannot say that my opinion is yet much shaken as to the hopelessness of preventing this national sin, notwithstanding the increased zeal and activity of the community; for one cannot help thinking that, in the present state of affairs, there is hardly an infidel or Popish scheme which Satan could suggest that would not, humanly speaking, gain the concurrence of the British Government and Parliament as at present constituted; and I have no doubt that the grant to Maynooth will also gain their concurrence. There is, however, I am happy to think, good and satisfactory grounds for expecting that important and beneficial results will flow from the movement,—not, perhaps, in preventing the perpetration of the iniquity, but in rallying Evangelical Dissenters on Protestant ground....⁴⁸

The zenith of the anti-Maynooth agitation, writes historian J. Wolfe, occurred between 30 April and 3 May, when 1039 delegates from all over the United Kingdom attended a conference in London at the Crown and Anchor Tavern.⁴⁹ On 29 April, the eve of the conference, opponents of the Bill held a “Great Anti-Maynooth Demonstration” at the Music Hall in Edinburgh.⁵⁰ Cunningham, speaking at the meeting, distinguished between the Catholic Relief Bill and the Maynooth Bill, giving his reasons for supporting the former while opposing the latter. After noting that opposition to the Maynooth grant was the bond uniting the various groups represented at the meeting, he stated that the tendency of the measure, unlike that of the Relief Bill, was to “promote the spread, and prolong the duration, of Popery.”⁵¹ He had no problem, Cunningham continued, when necessary to accomplish something the Presbyterian Church was unable to do, contributing to Churches which contain the main truths of Christianity—Baptists, Congregationalists, or Episcopalians—but he could not support Roman Catholicism. Not only because it did not contain all the main truths, but also for apocalyptic reasons. There is, he stated, “a sin mentioned in the Scriptures which is to be signally marked with punishment, namely, when the kings of this world give their power to the Beast, which just means,—laying aside the symbolical language of inspiration,—applying the national means to perpetuate Antichrist.”⁵²

⁴⁸ *Witness*, 5 April 1845.

⁴⁹ Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 199.

⁵⁰ *Witness*, 3 May 1845.

⁵¹ *ibid.*

⁵² *ibid.*

In May, Cunningham spoke at a banquet in Edinburgh held to oppose the endowment of Maynooth. His words revealed a less adamant stance on the establishment principle than during the Voluntary controversy. Speaking in an effort to show how Voluntaries and Free Churchmen might reasonably unite in opposition against the Maynooth grant, Cunningham stated that the Free Church was not prepared to abandon the establishment principle, but might be prepared for Parliament to abandon the practice. Proponents of Maynooth had put forth the argument that the endowment was based on a principle of justice. The maintenance of an established Church for a part of the population, they argued, should require a similar provision for others. If this principle were to be accepted, Cunningham stated, it would be better for the government to discontinue the establishments. This was especially true in the case of Ireland.

The obligation to promote the cause of God was not limited to individuals, but was extended to man in his public capacity. But they were not to do evil that good might come, the more especially as there was another way by which the evil now proposed to be done could be avoided,—namely, by sweeping away the Irish Church Establishment altogether.⁵³

In spite of Protestant protests, the agitation against Maynooth was too fragmented to affect the outcome of the Bill. On 30 June 1845, it received the royal assent.⁵⁴

The Maynooth grant had generated a great amount of resistance primarily because it was viewed as fostering Roman Catholicism. For evangelicals, however, especially Anglicans, it was also seen as encouraging the even more sinister “Romanizing designs of the Tractarians.”⁵⁵ Tractarianism, alternately known as the Oxford Movement, was so named because of ninety tracts published in Oxford between 1833 and 1841 by Anglican high Churchmen including John Henry Newman, John Keble,

⁵³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 318.

⁵⁴Wolffe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 210, 199.

⁵⁵Machin, *Politics and the Churches in Great Britain*, 171.

and Edward Pusey. Inflaming evangelical fears of Tractarianism at the time of the Maynooth proposal was Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism during that same year. Cunningham, having believed for some time what Tractarians so deliberately denied—that Tractarianism tended toward Catholicism—pointed out that with the secession of Newman and some of his followers, the matter was “now practically decided.”⁵⁶

Born during a perceived crisis in the Church of England with respect to the nature and authority of the Church and her ministry, the Oxford Movement was an attempt to rescue the Church from spiritual disaster.⁵⁷ The immediate event which gave rise to the movement was the Church temporalities (Ireland) bill introduced by the Whig government in the House of Commons on 12 February 1833. As a part of Whig Church reform, the bill in effect abolished two archbishoprics and eight bishoprics of what some felt to be a top-heavy Church for so small a Protestant population.⁵⁸ As Church historian, Owen Chadwick, argues, “By annihilating ten bishoprics the Whig government invited the English clergy to open their eyes to apostolic succession and its connexion with the independent authority of the church.”⁵⁹ It is not surprising then that tracts by the “Oxford divines” emphasized the importance of apostolic succession. In addition, some tracts encouraged a high view of the sacraments and dependence upon the early Church Fathers for the interpretation of Scripture.

It was this last emphasis that Cunningham particularly rejoined in his lectures at New College and in an article for the *North British Review*. This necessarily involved him in a discussion of the rule of faith, or, as Cunningham summarized it, “Where is

⁵⁶W. Cunningham, “Romanist Theory of Development,” *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian*, ed. by J. Buchanan and J. Bannerman (Edinburgh, 1863; repr. Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 35.

⁵⁷P. Toon, *Evangelical Theology 1833-1856: A Response to Tractarianism* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1979), 13.

⁵⁸O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church Part One: 1829-1859* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1971), 51-71.

⁵⁹*ibid.*, 71.

the supernaturally revealed will of God to be found?”⁶⁰

The Protestant answer to this infinitely important question is, that it is to be found in the canonical Scripture, excluding the Apocrypha, and nowhere else. The Popish answer is, that it is to be found partly in the written word, including the Apocrypha, and partly in unwritten tradition, *i.e.* doctrines and precepts alleged to have been delivered orally by Christ and his apostles, and to have been handed down in unbroken succession in the church.⁶¹

Cunningham believed the differences between Roman Catholics and Tractarians on this point to be “slight and insignificant,” both relying on Scripture and tradition jointly as the rule of faith and both systems, therefore, are “to be ascribed to the agency of the father of lies....”⁶² Pusey’s argument that Catholics held tradition and Scripture to be coordinate authorities while Tractarians held tradition to be subordinate to Scripture provoked from Cunningham the charge of “a very discreditable, if not a positively dishonest misrepresentation.”⁶³

Pusey’s views, however, were not Cunningham’s greatest concern. Cunningham considered Newman the able scholar in the group and he devoted an entire article in the *North British Review* to refuting Newman’s “Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine.” Written before Newman decided to leave the Church of England for the Church of Rome, Newman’s essay, Cunningham wrote, was “substantially an exposition of the process of thought by which he convinced himself of the truth of Romanism, and of the course of argumentation by which he thinks that system can be best defended.”⁶⁴ Newman, in other words, had devised a sophisticated argument justifying not only Catholic reliance upon unwritten tradition traceable to Christ and the apostles, but also upon modern developments in the Church with no obvious connection to the apostles. In place of a “chain of testimonies to apostolic times,” Newman’s system relied on the Church of Rome as a “developing authority” to

⁶⁰Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 516.

⁶¹*ibid.*, 516.

⁶²*ibid.*, 449, 453-4.

⁶³*ibid.*, 450.

⁶⁴Cunningham, “Romanist Theory of Development,” *Discussions on Church Principles*, 38.

legitimize what it held to be true developments of apostolic doctrine, though, in Cunningham's words, "never taught by the apostles [nor] "heard of till centuries after their death."⁶⁵ These doctrines surfaced later, Newman argued, because "time is necessary for the full comprehension and perfection of great ideas."⁶⁶ Cunningham agreed with the notion of a subjective development of doctrine, in the sense that individuals and Churches should increase in understanding of "what is actually contained in, or deducible from, the statements of the written word...."⁶⁷ Objective development, however, which Cunningham believed Newman assumed throughout his essay, was another matter. Rather than an increase in the knowledge of God's revealed will as found in the Scriptures, objective development changes, adds to, or even diminishes that revelation. This theory of development, posited Cunningham,

manifestly implies that the revelation made by Christ and His apostles was very defective and imperfect,—was greatly influenced, even as to its substance, by local and temporary causes,—that it was not adapted or fitted for permanent and universal application,—that it stands much in need of enlargements and improvements, —and that these enlargements and improvements might be made, as circumstances suggested or required, by men themselves, without divine inspiration. This is just the fundamental principle of the modern German Rationalists; and of all who hold it, whether Rationalists or Romanists, it may be said with truth, that they would act a more straightforward part if they would openly deny the divine origin and authority of the New Testament.⁶⁸

Whether or not the Maynooth grant fostered Tractarianism, it was not the last effort by the government which gave rise to Protestant agitation. The Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829 had opened the door for the reemergence of Roman Catholics into the mainstream of national life, but ancient disabilities still remained. It was still illegal, for example, for the British government to negotiate with or to conduct business with the pope and for Roman Catholic bishops to assume territorial

⁶⁵ibid., 42, 44, 51.

⁶⁶ibid., 53.

⁶⁷ibid., 56.

⁶⁸ibid., 55.

titles.⁶⁹ With the resurgence of vigorous Catholic nationalist agitation in Ireland, however, the desire to establish control there “made even Tory statesmen anxious to influence the Irish clergy by establishing a concordat or at least a diplomatic exchange with the pope,” “thus hoping to rule Ireland through Rome.”⁷⁰ In September 1847 the government appointed Gilbert Eliot, second Earl of Minto, ambassador to Rome. On 7 February 1848 Henry Petty-Fitzmaurice, third Marquis of Lansdowne, introduced legislation in the House of Lords to legalize this diplomatic representation.⁷¹

Anti-Catholic forces were quick to respond. Public meetings were held and petitions signed. On 22 February Candlish moved in the Edinburgh presbytery to petition both houses of Parliament against the bill. Cunningham spoke in favor of the petition, but did not believe, as did several speakers before him, that the establishment of diplomatic relations with the pope was a national sin as was the endowment of Maynooth. Although, as a British subject, Cunningham “felt it to be a foul degradation that this country should be making concessions to the Pope, in order to secure his assistance in governing Ireland,” he was not convinced that the measure in itself was a violation of Protestant principle, in that it did not necessarily endorse Roman Catholicism.⁷² His reason for making this observation was,

that he thought it of great practical importance to keep the line of demarcation clear and distinct between the class of measures which could be proved to involve necessarily, and in their own nature, a direct violation of Protestant principle, and those measures in regard to which this could not be very clearly established, or could be made out only by construction and inference, by going beyond what was necessarily involved in the nature of the measure itself, and taking into account the motives and objects of the parties proposing it. There were many grounds on which he could oppose this measure; but the chief ground on which he concurred in the Presbytery petitioning against it was, that he had no doubt that the Pope would contrive to make the proposed interchange of ambassadors a means of advancing the interests of Popery.⁷³

⁶⁹Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One*, 285; J.R. Wolfe, “Catholic Emancipation,” *DSCHT*, 149.

⁷⁰Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One*, 285; J.R. Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 232.

⁷¹Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One*, 285; J.R. Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 232-3.

⁷²*Witness*, 1 March 1848.

⁷³*Witness*, 1 March 1848; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 309-310.

The Bill passed its third reading in the House of Lords on 28 February 1848, but its second reading in the House of Commons was delayed for nearly six months, suggesting that “the government was nervous about raising a ‘No Popery’ cry.”⁷⁴ Although the bill finally received the royal assent on 4 September 1848, it was so modified with amendments that the Act could never be implemented.

At the time of these negotiations it was rumored that Pope Pius IX intended to reinstitute a national hierarchy for Roman Catholics in England. Since the seventeenth century, English Catholics had been under a type of Church organization headed by vicars apostolic instead of bishops, a form of government usually reserved for mission lands like China, India, and Oceania.⁷⁵ As early as September 1847, however, the *Salisbury Herald* announced that the pope had authorized the establishment of a hierarchy of archbishops and bishops, each to take his territorial title from towns not already the seats of Anglican bishops. And, in fact, on 5 October Pius IX approved the plan to replace the apostolic vicariates with an Archbishop of Westminster and seven other bishoprics.⁷⁶ Three years later, after several lengthy delays, the pope issued the brief on 29 September 1850, creating thirteen sees instead of eight. “The papal brief,” writes Owen Chadwick, “broke upon an astonished England at the end of the second week of October.”⁷⁷ In response to what was perceived as an attempt to restore papal dominion in England, English newspapers mounted an offensive little more than a week later. By early December Scotland joined the battle with the founding of the Scottish Reformation Society, which in constitution was interdenominational, but in truth was dominated by the Free Church.

Even before the founding of the Scottish Reformation Society, however, the Free Church addressed what had become known as the “Papal Aggression.” On

⁷⁴J.R. Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 234.

⁷⁵W. Ralls, “The Papal Aggression of 1850,” 243.

⁷⁶Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One*, 285; Drummond and Bulloch, *The Church in Victorian Scotland: 1843-1874*, 76.

⁷⁷Chadwick, *The Victorian Church: Part One*, 292.

Wednesday, 20 November 1850, at the Commission of the General Assembly, Cunningham seconded the adoption of resolutions against the pope's action. In this speech and in articles written about this time for the *North British Review* it is evident that Cunningham's focus was no longer theological differences between Protestants and Catholics, but the history of Roman Catholic attempts at "secular aggrandizement and universal supremacy."⁷⁸ "In regard to any act," Cunningham stated,

of such a system as Antichrist, or of its representatives, it will become them to learn one of the most obvious lessons which history taught, viz., that they ought not to look merely at the act in itself, as it might be viewed in the abstract, but they must view it in the aspect of the claims, and pretensions, and designs of Popery; and what they knew they would ultimately have to face wherever Popery prevailed and got power. The Papacy has always been in the habit of shuffling between civil and spiritual things, shifting from the one side to the other, and calling an act a civil act when it served her purpose, and calling it a spiritual one when that answered the object she had in view; and this was just one of the tricks by which Popery contrived to blind men's minds.⁷⁹

Cunningham illustrated this point with the example of the Inquisition, arguing that the Church exercised civil power while claiming to be spiritual, thus preventing intervention by the State. He concluded by expressing his concern that Scotland no longer had a clear understanding of the true nature of Roman Catholicism. "The grand thing, therefore, to be aimed at was to thoroughly leaven the community with scriptural views of Popery, and thus create a determined heart-hatred to it, founded upon an intelligent basis."⁸⁰

On 5 December 1850, the founding meeting of the Scottish Reformation Society

⁷⁸Cunningham, *Speech Delivered at the Meeting against Papal Aggression* (Edinburgh, 1850), 9. The articles referred to in the *North British Review* can be found in Cunningham's *Discussions on Church Principles: Popish, Erastian, and Presbyterian* under the titles, "The Temporal Sovereignty of the Pope," "The Temporal Supremacy of the Pope," "The Liberties of the Gallican Church," and "Royal Supremacy in the Church of England." These are articles of historical depth describing differing views of Church and State power: (1) Roman Catholic—the ecclesiastical power is superior to the civil power; (2) Erastianism—the civil power is superior to the ecclesiastical power; and (3) Free Church of Scotland—the Church and State are two distinct, independent societies, each supreme in its own province. Cunningham writes at length of the false foundations for the temporal sovereignty (exemption from the rule of the State) and temporal supremacy (the right to rule the State) of the pope.

⁷⁹*Witness*, 23 November 1850; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 311.

⁸⁰*Witness*, 23 November 1850.

was held in the Music Hall on George Street, Edinburgh. Admission was by ticket only, all of which were sold two days before the meeting. Hundreds of people were turned away, the room was still overcrowded, and many police were posted throughout the building to preserve order.⁸¹ In moving the second resolution, Cunningham continued to warn against the possibility of Papal interference in the temporal welfare of nations, citing Catholicism's history of employing "its spiritual power for advancing its temporal interests, and acquiring universal control."⁸² Cunningham opposed reenacting the civil disabilities that were eliminated with the Emancipation Act of 1829, but he wanted to lawfully fence the toleration of Catholicism in Great Britain with securities, guarantees, and even limitations. This was not a positive toleration which would give countenance to the Roman Church, but what he later described as a bare or negative toleration, in which Catholics should receive what they were "strictly entitled to as men and as British subjects."⁸³ Even in Roman Catholic countries, Cunningham argued, "the unrestrained power of the Pope to issue bulls and exercise other acts of jurisdiction, has been found to be inconsistent with national independence, insomuch that it has been necessary to limit it by concordats and treaties."⁸⁴ Speaking against those who were "squeamish" about anything that might seem to interfere with the principles of toleration, he asked,

If the red hat and the red slippers of a cardinal—for these are his proper insignia of office—are to be tolerated in this country, what next, do you think, will be attempted? Very likely the next step will be a Popish procession carrying the consecrated Host along our streets, and requiring us to fall down and worship the wafer.⁸⁵

"Christ's great adversary," Cunningham concluded, "has come out openly and boldly to the field of battle. ... That is the position now taken by the Pope of Rome on the soil

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 7 December 1850.

⁸² Cunningham, *Speech Delivered at the Meeting against Papal Aggression*, 9.

⁸³ *Witness*, 8 March 1851.

⁸⁴ Cunningham, *Speech Delivered at the Meeting against Papal Aggression*, 2.

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 10, 12.

of Great Britain; and we cannot, and we dare not, decline the contest.”⁸⁶

Cunningham assumed a prominent role in the formation of the Scottish Reformation Society, which soon operated throughout most of Scotland. Particularly effective in raising anti-Catholic feeling was *The Bulwark*, a journal closely associated with the society, to which Cunningham also actively gave his support. Consistent with Cunningham’s philosophy, *The Bulwark* aimed “to convert, by means of full intelligence, the instinctive and traditional hatred of [Roman Catholicism] which prevails amongst our population, into an enlightened determination to resist its progress and seek...to convert its adherents.”⁸⁷ Cunningham contributed numerous articles to the early issues of the journal, served on its Acting Committee with Candlish and Begg, and was revising editor, though he openly acknowledged that “its success was owing to the ability and energy of Dr Begg.”⁸⁸ *The Bulwark* proved to be the most successful nineteenth-century Protestant journal, claiming a circulation by May 1852 of 30,000.⁸⁹

In that same year, Cunningham contributed an article to the *North British Review*, in which he defended Protestantism by arguing that Roman Catholicism encouraged that which was evil in human personality. Throughout the article he points out the “peculiar guilt and danger of the Popish system as distinguished from the Protestant...in cherishing and fostering the depraved tendencies of human nature, instead of mortifying and subduing them, and, as a consequence of this, in exhibiting in point of fact far more extensively their baneful and ruinous operation, both on the temporal and spiritual welfare of men.”⁹⁰ This point Cunningham demonstrated by different aspects of Catholic religion. The system of ceremonial observances, with five additional sacraments, promoted the tendency to rely upon them to gain God’s

⁸⁶ibid., 16.

⁸⁷J.R. Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 160-1.

⁸⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 315; Minutes, Free Church [Anti-Popery Committee], 27 November 1850, Scottish Reformation Society, Edinburgh.

⁸⁹J.R. Wolfe, *The Protestant Crusade*, 162.

⁹⁰Cunningham, “The Errors of Romanism,” *Discussions on Church Principles*, 23.

favor; the professed ability of priests to forgive sins, not only declaratively, but judicially and authoritatively, encouraged reliance upon the merit of others; the infallibility of the Church led to undue reliance upon human authority; and especially the doctrine of justification resulted in self-righteousness. In “adducing and establishing against the Church of Rome,” Cunningham wrote, “the charge of fostering and cherishing men’s natural tendency to self-righteousness, we have no difficulty in showing that it encourages men to rely unduly and unwarrantably *both* on good works, or external conformity to the moral law, and on outward ceremonies.”⁹¹ This natural tendency to self-righteousness, Cunningham continued, was seen by the Apostle Paul to be the most significant obstacle to the furtherance of the gospel. And this further proved, Cunningham concluded, “that Popery, in its complex character and as a system, is Satan’s great scheme for frustrating the leading objects of the Christian revelation.”⁹²

Cunningham helped stamp a rigorous anti-Catholicism on the Free Church, promoting what he called a “determined heart-hatred” of Roman Catholicism. This hatred, however, was not for the individual Catholic, but for the system, which he believed obfuscated biblical Christianity and left its adherents in bondage to ceremony and ritual, rather than leading them to the freedom offered in the gospel. Although there were true believers in the Catholic Church, they were so, he argued, in spite of their religion, which fostered a reliance upon self rather than upon God. As an evangelical Protestant, Cunningham sought the salvation of Catholics and could not help but abhor a religious system that he viewed as barring people from that salvation. Nor could he tolerate his government’s support of the “Man of Sin,” which was not to be reformed, but was instead destined for destruction. So adamantly did Cunningham believe this, that he was prepared to abandon establishments altogether if Parliament felt obligated to assist Catholicism out of an abstract sense of justice

⁹¹ibid., 26.

⁹²ibid., 34.

based on the establishment principle.

Cunningham loathed Roman Catholicism, but he respected the sophistication of its doctrine and practice. And, to a greater extent than most, he was able to contrast the system, both in its details and as a whole, with that of Protestantism. His edition of Stillingfleet's work evidenced a systematic understanding of the history of the debate to the level of minutiae; and, though severe, his characterization of Catholicism as a degeneration of Christianity, as was paganism of the Patriarchal religion and pharisaism of Judaism, evidenced an ability to evaluate the system as a whole in light of the history of the Church.⁹³ He did, moreover, have a nuanced understanding of what he referred to as the Protestant Principle, arguing, for example, that establishing diplomatic relations with the Roman Catholic Church was not a national sin as was the endowment of Maynooth, because the former did not necessarily endorse Catholicism. Cunningham wrote extensively, spoke frequently, and argued vehemently against Roman Catholicism in an effort to counter what he believed was an increasingly euphemistic portrayal of her tenets coupled with unwitting acceptance of those tenets by increasing numbers of Protestants. To this end, he achieved a level of success, contributing significantly to the rise of anti-Catholicism in Scotland. It is not so evident, however, that these efforts ultimately checked legislative concessions to Catholics or converted many Catholics to Protestantism. By the mid 1850s the "No Popery" frenzy begun with Peel's Maynooth Act was over.

II

The Free Church was united in her efforts against Roman Catholicism. What became known as the College controversy, however, caused the greatest division within her own ranks that the fledgling denomination experienced during the first twenty years of existence. The Scottish Church had since the Reformation placed a

⁹³Cunningham believed that the Church began in the Old Testament, encompassing both the Patriarchal and Judaistic periods.

high premium on the need for a fully educated ministry, as evident in the comprehensive plan for the ordering of the universities set out in the *First Book of Discipline*. But, as Church historian, David F. Wright, writes, "Vision...could not itself ensure realization...."⁹⁴ By the early decades of the nineteenth century the system was deeply flawed.⁹⁵ In 1830 the Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Universities of Scotland had, it will be recalled, cited numerous defects in the Divinity Hall at Edinburgh University. These included irregular attendance, the short length of the Divinity session, the lack of a professor of Biblical Criticism, the infrequency of Divinity lectures, the absence of examinations, and the uniting of chairs and urban pastorates. Cunningham and other fellow students, therefore, gained much of their education outside of the classroom.⁹⁶

Deeply dissatisfied with the theological education provided in the Divinity Faculties of the universities, the Free Church intended New College to become one of the best equipped theological halls in the world. Cunningham's trip to America, as reflected in the following resolution of 7 July 1843, was one step taken to achieve this ambitious plan:

The Committee, deeply impressed with the great importance of having the theological instruction in the New College conducted according to the best principles, and after the most approved models, and assured that for the accomplishment of this, great benefit would be derived from a personal investigation, by an individual so peculiarly qualified for the important duty as Dr Cunningham, into the constitution and working of some of the most eminent of the American Theological Institutions, unanimously Resolved most earnestly to request that the Revd. Doctor would proceed for this purpose to America, whereby he would confer on this Committee and the Free Church, the highest obligation, and promote in very great degree, they feel assured, the character of the New College, and the cause of Religious Instruction in this country.⁹⁷

Writing for the *North British Review* in November 1844, after his return from

⁹⁴D.F. Wright, "Theological Education," *DSCHT*, 279.

⁹⁵S. Mechie, "Education for the Ministry in Scotland Since the Reformation," *RSCHS*, xiv (1960-2), 162.

⁹⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 30ff.

⁹⁷H. Watt, *New College Edinburgh: A Centenary History* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1946), 10-11.

America, Cunningham described what he perceived to be advantages in the American system:

There is in the American colleges and theological seminaries less of that mere lecturing *ex cathedra*, which has usually been the great staple of academical labour in our Scottish Universities, and which left a considerable portion of the students in a state of intellectual dormancy, and more of mental training, by means not only of examinations and frequent exercises, but by there being much more of discussion, upon all the topics that enter into the course, between the professors and the students. It is not uncommon to have something resembling the old *disputationes*, in which the students state their difficulties or propose objections, and the professors are expected to remove or solve them. This practice is of course somewhat trying to the professors, and unless managed with great ability and skill on their part, may be fitted to foster a habit of caviling, and a love of mere disputation and display, on the part of students, but it is manifestly useful as a mere intellectual exercise, and tends greatly to sharpen and stimulate the mental powers.⁹⁸

In May 1845, at the General Assembly, Cunningham acknowledged the great loss to the College due to Welsh's death and expressed concern about following in his footsteps. He then stated what he considered to be the first priority for the College Committee—the development of a formal theological curriculum, which would enable students to progress through courses covering the core theological disciplines in a set order over four years.⁹⁹ Before the Disruption, only three professors—in Divinity, Hebrew, and Church History—made up the faculty of the Divinity hall at Edinburgh University. The Divinity and Church History Professors each offered one series of lectures which took four years to complete. Some students, then, began their studies in the third or fourth session of Divinity or Church History and completed the earlier sessions in their final years of attendance. In short, the system failed to recognize the importance of presenting the subjects to the students in a set order.¹⁰⁰ Consistent with a plan advocated by Chalmers, Cunningham proposed that each professor teach two classes in his subject—a junior and a senior class—to each of

⁹⁸W. Cunningham, "The United States of America," 159.

⁹⁹*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland, 1845*, 218.

¹⁰⁰S.J. Brown, "The Disruption and the Dream," 37.

whom he should devote two hours a day.¹⁰¹ Students then would progress through a four-year, defined program of study, with two years of study in each of the core disciplines. In 1846 New College embraced this plan along with other proposed developments that would significantly reform theological education.

Before all of the improvements were implemented, however, a “shadow became visible of a controversy which exercised a very disturbing influence on the Church....”¹⁰² At the first General Assembly of the Free Church, Welsh, as convener of the Education Committee, had spoken of the *necessity* of establishing a theological college in one of the University seats and of the *desirability* of establishing at least three separate theological colleges, one in Edinburgh, Aberdeen, and Glasgow. Initially, however, the Church would conserve its resources—both ministers and finances—by founding only one college.¹⁰³ Thus the Education Committee purchased rooms at 80 George Street, in Edinburgh’s New Town, and opened for its first session in November 1843 with 168 students. Until Chalmers’s death in 1847 there existed a general agreement in the Free Church that before developing a theological college at Aberdeen, and perhaps at Glasgow, New College would be fully established.¹⁰⁴ And in Cunningham’s inaugural address on 9 November 1847 as Principal of New College, he expressed his intent to make that his priority. I hope, he stated, to “imbibe more of the spirit of our lamented father, and to follow out more fully the conceptions which he had formed of a theological institute....”¹⁰⁵ The General Assembly of 1847, however, had decided to seek the “mind of the Church” on the subject of theological education, and instructed each presbytery to deliberate the matter in preparation for next year’s Assembly.¹⁰⁶ By early 1848 it was clear that a

¹⁰¹ *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1845, 218.

¹⁰² Walker, *Chapters*, 98.

¹⁰³ *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, May 1843, 114.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, “The Disruption and the Dream,” 44.

¹⁰⁵ Cunningham, *Inaugural Lecture Addressed to the Students of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1848), 22-23.

¹⁰⁶ *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1847, “Report of the New College,” 3.

different spirit was animating many in the Church. Presbyteries from the north and west of Scotland began overturing the General Assembly calling for the additional halls to be established immediately.

On Wednesday, 5 April 1848, at the meeting of the Edinburgh presbytery, the motion to overture the Assembly recommending the establishment of a second college at Aberdeen was vehemently resisted by Cunningham. Considering himself, as head of the Free Church's only College, to be the guardian of theological education for the Church, and believing that the Free Church was not financially able to support a second college, Cunningham argued "that to establish another Divinity hall at Aberdeen, was at once to seal the fate of any attempt to improve and complete the system of theological education in the Free Church."¹⁰⁷ He believed that their first priority should be to significantly raise the standard for the training of the ministry, devising a complete system of theological education, "which in Scotland had hitherto been too much of a farce."¹⁰⁸ Although Cunningham made no counter-motion, "he was," in his own words, "determined to resist the proposal of establishing a Divinity hall at Aberdeen by all the fair means in his power."¹⁰⁹ In the end, his opinion held sway, and the motion was defeated.

In the following month, however, at the General Assembly, on 24 May 1848, Andrew Gray, pastor of the West Free Church, Perth, reported on the number of presbyteries for and against establishing a theological hall at Aberdeen, noting that presbyteries were considerably more favorable towards the proposal this year than they were at the same time last year. Cunningham then opened, with a speech lasting two hours, what became a lengthy and rancorous debate on college extension. "I confess," Cunningham stated, "I feel disposed to cherish something like annoyance and dissatisfaction, that, practically, and in the circumstances in which we are placed,

¹⁰⁷Rainy, Cunningham, 336; Witness, 8 April 1848.

¹⁰⁸*Witness*, 8 April 1848.

¹⁰⁹*ibid.*

the consideration of the extension of theological education will, I fear, prevent this General Assembly from giving to the subject of the curriculum the measure of time and attention which its importance demands.”¹¹⁰ Continuing, he noted that college extension was, more than any other subject, responsible for “keen feeling and lively interest...in the mind of the Church.”¹¹¹ With typical clarity, Cunningham stated the question that above all others must be considered. “What is,” he asked, “the right mode of providing an adequate and efficient theological education for the candidates for the ministry of the Free Church of Scotland?”¹¹² The question of theological extension, therefore, must not be considered apart from the question, “what is a...full and adequate theological education?”¹¹³ Cunningham then stated what he felt should be the priorities for the Free Church with respect to theological education, taking into account the problem of candidates who found it difficult to relocate to Edinburgh.

The pressing need

is to set forth what would be a right and fully equipped theological institute, and to realise a full and proper theological curriculum, in order to bring that into full and practical operation, then to regulate her arrangements in such a way as would tend most fully to secure to all the candidates for ministry the full benefits of this fully equipped theological institute, and then, having done that, to consider what provision of an inferior or supplementary kind it was needful and practicable to make for those candidates for the ministry for whom she found a difficulty in securing the enjoyment of the best theological education she could give.¹¹⁴

Cunningham then suggested a number of improvements to the existing system of theological education, all of which he believed must be in place prior to the consideration of extension. First, rather than presbyteries examining prospective students for the divinity hall, as to their previous studies, the General Assembly should appoint a body of examiners consisting of ten to twelve “of the most

¹¹⁰*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1848, 112.

¹¹¹*ibid.*

¹¹²*ibid.*, 113.

¹¹³*ibid.*

¹¹⁴*ibid.*

intelligent and accomplished ministers.”¹¹⁵ This would provide a more uniform standard of testing than each of seventy one presbyteries examining, according to their own standard, prospective students. Second, students should enter New College with a working knowledge of Hebrew so that during each session, beginning with the first, they will be able to study the Word of God in the original languages.

Cunningham believed that this would help to correct what he considered to be the great defect, almost a great scandal, in theological education in Scotland during the last 100 years—the lack of systematic exegesis of the Old and New Testaments. This meant, thirdly, that five professors would be required instead of four—two professors of systematic theology, two professors of exegetical theology (one for each of the Old and New Testaments), and one in Church History (or, Historical and Polemic Theology, as Cunningham preferred). Cunningham felt so strongly about the need for the additional professor in exegetical theology that in the event the Church decided to stay with four professors, he thought they should consider abolishing his Chair of Church History and replacing it with one in Exegetical Theology. He did, however, call for five professors:

I cannot see...any plan whereby a full and adequate theological education, adapted to the necessities and wants of the age, can be effectually provided, except by such arrangements as these. I fear that a feeling may spring up in the minds of many of the brethren as to the having of five Professors, which may develop itself in this way,— ‘We feel that this is a great number of Professors; we never had so many before,—(laughter),—we have made very respectable ministers, and done very well without any such multiplication of Professors or extension of curriculum, and, without incurring any increased expense, we may do very well again.’ Now I do not mean to say that we have not done very well; but I am very confident that we might have done a great deal better,—(hear)—for I am satisfied that there have been radical defects in the existing system of theological education hitherto in operation in this country....¹¹⁶

Although Cunningham acknowledged that the General Assembly of 1845 had expressed the opinion that there should be a full theological faculty at Aberdeen—

¹¹⁵ibid., 115.

¹¹⁶ibid., 117.

something he opposed even then—he viewed that opinion as non-binding on the Church, and for various reasons, something that should now be reconsidered. The establishment of an additional college, he argued, was unnecessary, impracticable, and, most importantly, detrimental to the existing education for the ministry.

Unnecessary because New College was capable of graduating more than twice the number of candidates for the ministry than the number of vacancies in the Free Church; impracticable because funds were not then available to support more than one college—New College was already 2060 pounds in debt; and detrimental because it would divert resources and energy away from efforts to complete the faculty and develop the curriculum at New College.¹¹⁷ Concluding, Cunningham read his motion proposing that “the General Assembly are of opinion that the Church is not called upon at present to make provision for extending the means of theological education by establishing another full Divinity Hall.”¹¹⁸ As a harbinger of difficult days ahead, Candlish brought the opposing motion, arguing that a central divinity hall was inadequate for a national Church, thus initiating a course of action that would lead to a future division between the two men who now led the Free Church. Cunningham’s motion, with a vote of 189 to 126, won, but years of heated debate would follow.¹¹⁹

Since 1844, the presbyteries of the university seats, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and St Andrews, had been authorized by the General Assembly to superintend theological studies for students unable to attend New College. The General Assembly of 1845, it will be recalled, had indicated its desire to establish a college in Aberdeen. As a first step toward the fulfillment of that prospect, the Revd Maclagan was appointed as Professor to the students in Aberdeen. In July 1848, less than two months after the General Assembly passed Cunningham’s motion not to increase the provision for theological education at Aberdeen at present, the Theological Committee of Aberdeen

¹¹⁷ibid., 119-124.

¹¹⁸ibid., 124.

¹¹⁹ibid., 159.

Presbytery challenged the decision. Maclagan, as convener of the committee, wrote to the College Committee proposing that several ministers of Aberdeen assist him in providing theological education to the students. The College Committee, of which Cunningham served as convener, refused to sanction the proposal. Nevertheless, in an obvious challenge to the decision of the Assembly of 1848, Aberdeen Presbytery enlisted four ministers from Aberdeen and one professor from Marischal College to instruct the students in Systematic Theology, Natural Theology and Geology, Church History, and Greek and Hebrew Exegesis. The College Committee chose not to address the matter further until the Assembly of 1849.¹²⁰

On Saturday, 26 May 1849, Cunningham presented the report of the College Committee to the General Assembly, seeking an opinion on the action taken by the presbytery of Aberdeen. After some discussion, it became a non-issue, Cunningham, himself, recommending that the provision for theological instruction at Aberdeen remain the same for another year.¹²¹ Another closely related matter, however, threatened to enliven the debate over college extension at Aberdeen. Since the death of Chalmers in 1847, the chair of Theology had been vacant. Cunningham, for two years, therefore, had taught not only his class, but also that of theology. Candlish had initially accepted the professorship, but resigned before his responsibilities began, choosing instead to remain as minister of St. George's Free Church after his replacement unexpectedly died. The Assembly of 1848, therefore, had charged the College Committee with submitting to the Commission in August, one or more names of ministers whom they considered best suited to fill the vacancy. The Committee recommended James Bannerman, minister at Ormiston, whom they had considered in 1845 for Professor of Theology for Aberdeen before choosing Maclagan. The Commission, however, chose to delay filling the post after Maclagan's name was also brought forward, leaving the decision to the Assembly and thus setting in motion nine

¹²⁰*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1849, 28.

¹²¹*ibid.*, 230.

months of agitation within the Church, reflecting a serious division of opinion over the nomination.¹²²

On Tuesday, 5 June 1849, at the General Assembly, Candlish nominated Bannerman as Professor of Theology for New College. Friends of Maclagan, then, put his name forth for the post. After much discussion, those favoring extension at Aberdeen, in an attempt to protect their interests, asked who would replace Maclagan if he were removed to Edinburgh. If the Assembly did elect Maclagan, Cunningham responded, he would “hold it to be his duty” to ask whether or not provisions for theological training at Aberdeen should be discontinued.¹²³ His statement created a sensation in the Assembly and inflamed the discussion, some suggesting that Cunningham was attempting to insure the election of Bannerman by fear tactics, others realizing the precarious nature of theological training at Aberdeen. In truth, Cunningham was at this stage attempting to keep the peace in the Church. By recommending Bannerman, he had hoped to prevent a thorough discussion of college extension, which he knew would occur if Maclagan were removed to Edinburgh, and which he knew would lead him to argue against any permanent situation at Aberdeen. Cunningham held a position on extension different from many, if not most, in the Church. A good number of those opposed to college extension at this juncture felt that additional divinity halls should be established once the improvements to New College, which Cunningham had recommended to the Assembly of 1848, were complete. There is no evidence, however, that Cunningham believed an additional college should ever be considered. His dream was to perfect one institution, going significantly beyond the initial corrections, always critiquing and improving the education provided to ministerial candidates.¹²⁴ In the end, Cunningham succeeded in forestalling a discussion on the merits of college extension, and moments later

¹²²ibid., 226; Rainy, *Cunningham*, 348-350; Walker, *Chapters*, 102.

¹²³*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1849, 227.

¹²⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, Appendix E, 519.

Bannerman was chosen for the post by a vote of 108 to 88. Although a protracted heated debate was averted, the significant division evidenced by this vote reflected a far more serious division forming in the Free Church.

The agitation over college extension heated up after the Assembly, becoming so bitter that some began to compare it to the days leading up to the Disruption.¹²⁵ In the autumn, the presbytery of Aberdeen took steps to secure their position. Plans were made to construct and offer to the Free Church a building for a divinity hall, rendering more permanent the previously temporary accommodation. The College Committee, viewing this move as an unfair attempt to bias the Church on the question of college extension, censured the act. By November, rules of civility regarding personal exchange were abandoned. In a letter dated 26 November 1849, which appeared on the front page of the *Witness*, Andrew Gray addressed the ministers of the Free Church regarding the College committee. "Dr Cunningham," he wrote,

represents me as not believing in the honesty of the account given privately by himself, and publicly by the College Committee, concerning the reason of their censure upon the Presbytery of Aberdeen. I object altogether to that invidious construction of my conduct. It is unfair to me. I do not deserve the odium with which it would cover me in the eyes of the Church.¹²⁶

Cunningham had written privately to Gray on 7 November denying that the motive underlying the College committee's censure was the ultimate suppression of a divinity hall in Aberdeen. Gray responded with a letter to Cunningham, intended for the College committee, containing much of what he now published in the *Witness*. In his letter to the *Witness*, Gray implies that Cunningham suppressed that letter, but concludes on a conciliatory note: "I little thought that anything would occur to give rise to a public difference of this kind with one whom I love and admire as I do Dr Cunningham; but this I will say, that he has a place in my heart of which nothing that

¹²⁵Walker, *Chapters*, 103.

¹²⁶*Witness*, 28 November 1849.

I believe it to be possible for him to do will ever deprive.”¹²⁷

The day after Gray’s letter appeared in the *Witness*, Cunningham responded with a letter that also appeared on the front page on 1 December 1849: “Mr Gray published in the *Witness*, a letter, previously addressed to me, in which he charged me and other Members of the Acting Committee...with having been influenced, in disapproving of a proposal for erecting a building for a Divinity Hall, by a regard to the object of suppressing the Aberdeen Professorship....”¹²⁸ Cunningham then attempted to put the matter behind him.

In this point of view, I consider it a sufficient answer to say, that I understand it to be a rule universally acknowledged and acted upon among honourable men who are living on friendly terms with each other, that an explicit disclaimer of a motive imputed, ought to be at once received and admitted, and ought to prevent a repetition of the imputation.... I am done with this subject.¹²⁹

Cunningham’s involvement with the subject of college extension, however, was only just beginning.

College extension had now become a public affair, and a pamphlet war ensued.¹³⁰ The first into the fray was Candlish. Although he favored establishing additional colleges in Aberdeen and Glasgow, Candlish, noting the public skirmish between Cunningham and Gray, pleaded for a lull in extension debate and activity until New College was thoroughly established in accordance with Cunningham’s plans.¹³¹ In doing so, he decried the potential for a party spirit to develop. With rumors of packing the Assembly already surfacing, Candlish asked extensionists to consider the

¹²⁷*Witness*, 28 November 1849.

¹²⁸*ibid.*

¹²⁹*ibid.*

¹³⁰In addition to the pamphlets included below, see also J. Gibson, *Extension of Divinity Halls* (Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1850); W.B. Cunningham (close friend of William Cunningham), *Collegiate Education Versus Collegiate Extension* (Edinburgh, 1850); *On the Extension of the Means of Theological Education in the Free Church* (Glasgow, 1850); and P. Fairbairn, *Thoughts on College Matters* (Glasgow and Edinburgh, 1854).

¹³¹Candlish, *College Extension in the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1849), 5-9, 11, 17, 25.

harm of making extension a litmus test for returning elders to the General Assembly.¹³²

James Buchanan, spurred to action by the rising conflict between the College committee and the presbytery of Aberdeen, immediately followed with a pamphlet on the merits of the case against extension, echoing Cunningham's reasons and crediting Cunningham with improvements to Chalmers's revised curriculum.¹³³ More important, perhaps, he defended the censure handed out by the now-besieged College committee. Reminding the Church that the committee was appointed by the Assembly to oversee all the arrangements for the collegiate education of ministerial candidates, Buchanan stated that Maclagan, at the committee's behest, had submitted the reason for Aberdeen presbytery's sanction of a college building. They had done so "in the confident hope" of securing one or more additional Professors.¹³⁴ Concerned that the College committee might be seen as acquiescing or even countenancing the Aberdeen plan if they left them to proceed after receiving an official intimation, "and not wishing to be committed to the ultimate adoption of measures which they conceived to be unwarranted by the Church, at variance with the latest decision of the Assembly on the subject, and, to say the very least, inopportune and premature," the committee had resolved to publicly express their disapproval.¹³⁵ Buchanan also noted that he had been present when Chalmers had invited Maclagan to accept the appointment to the Chair at Aberdeen. Maclagan, wrote Buchanan, accepted the appointment with "the clear understanding that Dr Chalmers and the Committee had expressly discountenanced 'the imagination' of a colleague."¹³⁶

Buchanan's pamphlet provoked a response from Francis Edmond, an advocate

¹³²Candlish, *College Extension*, 9-11.

¹³³F. Edmond, *A Letter to the Office-Bearers and Members of the Free Church of Scotland, in Reference to Dr. James Buchanan's Letter on the College Question* (Aberdeen and Edinburgh, 1850), 3.

¹³⁴J. Buchanan, *The College Question* (Edinburgh, 1849), 34-5.

¹³⁵*ibid.*, 35.

¹³⁶*ibid.*, 33.

from Aberdeen enlisted by the Aberdeen presbytery to represent their cause. Edmond denied Buchanan's claim that Maclagan had accepted the appointment with the knowledge that he would operate indefinitely without an additional professor. But he went much further than defending Maclagan. He also took opportunity to attribute what he saw as a change in direction—from several colleges to one college—to a change in conveners of the College committee from Chalmers to Cunningham. In the process Edmond ascribed a nobility of character to Chalmers which he implied was lacking in Cunningham. This he based on the College committee's refusal to release their minutes to Edmond, who had sought access to them in order to prove that the committee was using the proposed college building as an occasion to render extension less certain. Edmond's pamphlet revealed a growing suspicion between those who favored extension in Aberdeen and those in Edinburgh opposed to it. With his pamphlet the rhetoric intensified as he finally blamed the conflict on the fact that New College was now being managed by its professors, or as he called them, "a small metropolitan oligarchy."¹³⁷ Cunningham and others who had been part of the College committee at the time of Maclagan's appointment responded with an advertisement in the *Witness*, which appeared on 23 March 1850. "We know," they wrote, "that Mr M'Laggan, when the appointment was offered to him, endeavoured to persuade the Committee to appoint another Theological Professor to co-operate with him, or to hold out some hope that such an appointment would soon be made. The Committee decidedly refused to take this step...or to give any countenance to this step."¹³⁸ Edmond then responded with a second pamphlet, stating that the actions taken by the College committee were not only jeopardizing extension in Aberdeen, but the existence of the Free Church in the north of Scotland.¹³⁹ He further responded with a strongly worded letter to the *Witness*, especially critical of Cunningham and

¹³⁷Edmond, *A Letter to the Office-Bearers*, 4, 5, 15, 16.

¹³⁸*Witness*, 23 March 1850.

¹³⁹Edmond, *A Second Letter in Answer to Dr. James Buchanan, in Reference to the Free Church Divinity Hall, Aberdeen* (Aberdeen and Edinburgh, 1850), 3-4.

Buchanan.¹⁴⁰ Just days before the General Assembly, the *Aberdeen Banner* joined the battle with a letter to the *Witness*, reflecting a defiance previously reserved for those outside the Free Church:

The meeting of the General Assembly is at hand, and the *Witness*, therefore, comes out strongly against college extension, if, peradventure, by so doing he [Hugh Miller] may aid the cause of the Edinburgh Professors,—our ‘central institute,’—and prevent the full discussion of this important subject. The tactic, however, we opine, will not succeed. Neither pamphlet nor article, neither speech nor advertisement, will deter the friends of extension from prosecuting an object involving so much the present and future prosperity of the Free Church of Scotland. The advocates of centralization have due warning that this is the case, and they may bethink them of the prudence of the course they are pursuing. Let it, then, be distinctly understood by the Acting College Committee and by the *Witness*, that they have mistaken their men: to the laws of the Church we will pay all deference, but we will neither be ruled by, nor become an appendage to, any Edinburgh clique, however talented....¹⁴¹

Just as the conflict over college extension was about to reach crisis proportions, efforts at reconciliation began to be exerted. Gray, in yet another pamphlet on the college question, made a half-hearted apology to Cunningham and the College Committee for what “seemed” to be imputing a motive to them after it had been specifically disclaimed.¹⁴² More importantly, Cunningham and Candlish met extensively, negotiating with men on both sides of the question to seek a resolve to the conflict which could be proposed in the upcoming General Assembly. The Assembly opened on 23 May 1850. Seven days later, on Thursday, 30 May, Cunningham opened the discussion with words of hope. After acknowledging the sincere intentions of those involved in the negotiations leading up to the resolutions he was about to make, he continued:

Proposals would be made to the House, in which, there was reason to believe, that a very large proportion of its members could cordially agree, and that there might thus be a basis laid on which, if it were fairly and fully followed out, they might cherish the expectation of seeing this

¹⁴⁰ *Witness*, 18 May 1850.

¹⁴¹ *ibid.*, 22 May 1850.

¹⁴² A. Gray, *The College Question* (Perth, 1850), v, vi.

painful contention brought to an end, and seeing the united strength and vigour of the Church again brought to bear on the accomplishments of the objects which they all concurred in holding to be of such paramount importance.¹⁴³

Acknowledging the mood of the Church, Cunningham stated that college extension would almost certainly take place once it was “safe and practicable.”¹⁴⁴ Before this, however, he let the Assembly know that his own conviction was that

they had the best security practicable, both for the soundness of their theological teaching, and for the efficiency of theological training, in one fully-equipped theological seminary, accessible to the whole Free Church, and closely watched and superintended by the Church, and with that feeling of undivided responsibility on the part of the Church as to the way in which the affairs of the Hall were conducted.¹⁴⁵

With these considerations in mind, Cunningham proposed resolutions requiring the Church to (1) provide financially for theological education in a more secure way than by the annual collection; (2) encourage endowments for theological education; (3) properly endow New College first; (4) accept endowments for particular locations such as Aberdeen and Glasgow; (5) keep in mind an increase in provision for theological education at Aberdeen, but for now require two regular sessions at New College; and (6) terminate the arrangements for instruction at Glasgow altogether. As Cunningham concluded, Candlish rose. Upon announcing that he intended to second the proposals, Candlish was greeted with loud applause, many in the house pleased to see the two leaders of the Free Church, though on opposite sides of the issue, working together to restore harmony. Loud applause also greeted him as he noted “the admirable tone and spirit of all his [Cunningham’s] remarks in introducing this subject.”¹⁴⁶ Begg followed Candlish with a speech strongly objecting to the

¹⁴³ *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1850, 157.

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 159.

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 158.

¹⁴⁶ *ibid.*, 162-3.

resolutions, which he argued would “smother Glasgow and throttle Aberdeen.”¹⁴⁷ Instead he moved for immediate recognition of Aberdeen College. Begg, however, was doomed to failure. Even Gray sided with Cunningham, acknowledging both Cunningham’s extraordinary ability and generous concession. He

felt that a tribute which came from the bottom of his heart was due, as he was sure all in this Assembly must feel, to the magnanimity of Dr Cunningham—(cheers)—in his opening address. There was no man in the country who ever occupied the floor of a public assembly in the kingdom, or even engaged in the discussion of any legislative question, who had less reason than Dr Cunningham to fear entering into the abstractions and merits of any question with which he might be called to deal. (Hear, hear.) Dr Cunningham, with his usual frankness and energy, had pronounced the views of some others on this question to be unsubstantial plausibilities. He (Mr Gray) must say that he would rather defend unsubstantial plausibilities in controversy with an ordinary man, than he would oppose them in controversy with Dr Cunningham. (A laugh.) He (Mr Gray) rejoiced with his whole heart at the pacific spirit which had entered into this discussion, and which was assuredly to be attributed to the forbearance of Dr Cunningham and the College Committee.¹⁴⁸

After hours of debate, the cry of “vote” began to be heard. Nevertheless, a third motion was proposed as a sort of *via media* between those of Cunningham and Begg. Although it was not adopted, Cunningham felt the need to reply. Rising amidst loud applause, he made it clear that the resolutions he proposed represented concessions on both sides—the non-extensionists conceding that the abstract question of college extension was not again to be a matter of debate within the Free Church; the extensionists conceding that there was no possibility at present of taking any practical steps toward extension. Moments later, by a vote of 195 to 92, the house accepted Cunningham’s resolutions over Begg’s.¹⁴⁹

Cunningham had entered the hall that day discouraged and deeply depressed at the prospect of a protracted debate with men whom he had served with for so many years and for whom he had great respect and affection.¹⁵⁰ He had been willing to concede

¹⁴⁷ibid., 167.

¹⁴⁸ibid., 187.

¹⁴⁹ibid., 190-192.

¹⁵⁰ibid., 191-192.

much in order to achieve, at least for a season, harmony in the Church. He did, of course, reserve the right to discuss the compatibility of any future proposals for extension with existing obligations, but he relinquished what he so strongly believed to be the best method of theological training—a single college. This was a major compromise for Cunningham, who felt, probably more than anyone else in the Free Church, the weight of responsibility for perfecting the education of her ministerial candidates. In spite of the cost of compromise, Cunningham walked home that night relieved that the members of Assembly had for the most part acted together and that the potential for several years of harmony seemed good.¹⁵¹

During the summer of 1850, great efforts were made to complete the New College building for the opening of the new session in November. Although at times the goal seemed impossible, the first of three proposed quadrangles was finished in time, and formal opening exercises were held on Wednesday, 6 November in the Free High Church, forming the eastern side of the edifice.¹⁵² Demand for tickets greatly exceeded the number of seats, and all parts of the Church were densely crowded, with ministers and students filling the lower section and the public occupying the gallery. At twelve o'clock, Principal Cunningham and the other professors, in full academic regalia, entered from the vestry and sat down in front of the pulpit. The singing of sixteen lines from the sixty eighth Psalm commenced the devotional exercises, after which Cunningham delivered his address.¹⁵³ Noting that New College, by resolve of the Free Church, represented an endeavor to provide professional training for ministerial candidates in a more complete way than had ever been attempted by any unendowed Church in Scotland, Cunningham went on to describe his view of a theological college. The primary object, he stated, "is to secure that those who pass through it shall possess, in a respectable measure, the mental qualifications which are

¹⁵¹ibid., 192.

¹⁵²H. Watt, *New College Edinburgh*, 43; The two other quadrangles were never constructed. The Free High Church is now the library of New College.

¹⁵³*Witness*, 9 November 1850.

thought necessary in order to entering upon the office of the ministry.”¹⁵⁴

Cunningham had no intention of deprecating the importance of spiritual qualifications for those entering ministry, but he considered “originating and fostering personal piety” to be a collateral object, the first in fact of three.¹⁵⁵ A second was the encouragement of those gifted intellectually and desirous of literary attainment to “reach distinguished eminence, and make valuable additions to professional literature.”¹⁵⁶ A third and final collateral object was the promoting of “a manly and elevated, honourable and generous tone of sentiment and of feeling, and enlarged sympathy with every thing that is excellent, lovely, and of good report....”¹⁵⁷

Concluding, Cunningham tied the success of the Free Church to the character and qualifications of her ministers.

Truth, indeed, like its Author, is eternal and unchangeable; and having been brought into our present position, as we believe, by the honest maintenance of a portion of God’s truth, we are warranted, while we continue to adhere to that truth, to expect the divine blessing upon our labours. But we cannot reasonably expect some of the adventitious advantages we have hitherto enjoyed as a church to be long continued to us, and we must look, mainly, under God, to the character and qualifications of our ministers for our permanent usefulness and respectability. It holds true universally of every profession or class of men in society, that their permanent efficiency and influence depend mainly upon strength and steadiness of principle, diligence and fidelity in the discharge of duty, and a high standard of professional skill and ability. And, with all that is peculiar—fundamentally peculiar—in the office of gospel ministers, with reference to its appropriate objects and ends, this general principle applies also to them. Their permanent influence and respectability in the community, and thereby, in some measure, the probability of their success in the great object they profess to aim at, depend upon their exhibiting, in combination with that diligent and unwearied discharge of the duties of their calling, which can result only from the operation of genuine piety and devotedness to God, a high standard of professional ability and acquirements. And, upon this ground, let me again commend this institution, and every thing that may affect its welfare and efficiency, to your kindness and to your prayers.¹⁵⁸

The next day Cunningham delivered his introductory lecture on Church History to

¹⁵⁴Cunningham, *Address Delivered at the Opening of New College*, 6 November 1850 (Edinburgh, [1850]), 45.

¹⁵⁵*ibid.*

¹⁵⁶*ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵⁷*ibid.*

¹⁵⁸*ibid.*, 57.

his students. "We have now," he stated, "the prospect of being able to carry out, to a considerable extent, some of the changes, and, as we believe, improvements, which we have long desired to introduce into our arrangements for theological education."¹⁵⁹ The optimism in his words, based partially on his hoped-for lull in debate over college extension, was to some degree unwarranted. Extensionists who strongly disagreed with the decision of the last Assembly renewed their efforts in the lower courts, procuring overtures from four synods and seven presbyteries in their support. Prepared to ask the Assembly for increased provision at Aberdeen and Glasgow, these men renewed the discussion at the General Assembly of 1851. On Thursday, 29 May, the debate on college extension began, with Cunningham quietly observing, prepared to speak only if he felt it necessary to do so. Candlish initially called on the Assembly to forego the discussion on extension altogether, declaring it inexpedient. When this was countered with another motion to debate, and the speeches again became heated, Robert Buchanan, amidst cries of "Vote, vote," and "Adjourn, adjourn," rose to offer an alternative to a vote.¹⁶⁰ Rather than divide the house, the two motions should be remitted to a committee for a resolution to be laid before the Assembly within a day or two. One member of the house rose immediately to agree with Buchanan, stating that the question before them "was destroying the whole Church."¹⁶¹ "It was perfectly evident," he concluded, "from the temper of this House, that the sooner the matter was settled the better."¹⁶² Within minutes, the proposal was agreed to, and Robert Buchanan returned the committee's report the next day. After a brief debate, Cunningham, who had served on the committee, closed the discussion on another note of personal concession. The resolutions proposed by the committee were consistent, he believed, with those he had brought the previous year. They were

¹⁵⁹Cunningham, *Introductory Lecture on Church History*, 7 November 1850 (Edinburgh, [1850]), 61.

¹⁶⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 353-4; *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1851, 230-231, 253.

¹⁶¹*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1851, 253-4.

¹⁶²*ibid.*, 254.

merely explanatory and supplementary. The only point on which they exceeded the previous resolutions was the resolve to appoint an additional professor for Aberdeen as soon as sufficient means were available. On a personal note, he stated that he “was willing to entertain a proposal for proceeding with Aberdeen piecemeal, and the more so that he considered it was an element of producing a large measure of harmony, and [would] save them from the consequences of going on in a certain line of discussion.”¹⁶³ The Assembly applauded his words and agreed to the new resolutions. Cunningham, however, had acted in haste, feeling pressure to compromise. He later described his sense of the proceedings: “the disturbance got up, the Assembly frightened out of its wits, the Committee appointed.”¹⁶⁴ He declared, moreover, that there was a “reign of terror” over the proceedings which deprived it of any claim to respect. This impression was contradicted by others, but it remained in Cunningham’s mind as the debate over extension continued.¹⁶⁵

Although not intended by Cunningham, the resolutions accepted in the Assembly of 1851, encouraged a shift in the mind of the Church. The deliverance of the Assembly of 1850, considered in the context of the history of the debate, represented an acknowledgment on all parties in the Free Church that extension, when practicable, was inevitable. The resolutions, however, were viewed in such a way as to discourage immediate steps toward that object. But the deliverance of the Assembly of 1851 had the effect of inviting steps toward extension.¹⁶⁶ By the end of the year, it became public that Aberdeen was taking advantage of the new resolutions by attempting to endow an additional chair. At the Assembly of 1852, the Committee on College Finance and Endowments presented a communication from Edmond, announcing that he was ready to hand over 2000 pounds as a partial endowment, on

¹⁶³ *ibid.*, 285.

¹⁶⁴ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 356.

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*, 522.

the condition that the Assembly appoint an additional professor at Aberdeen.¹⁶⁷

Rather than discuss the matter immediately, the Assembly appointed a committee to return a recommendation at a future diet. The Assembly later embraced their recommendation to accept the endowment of a chair, to be instituted only when the Church was satisfied she had sufficient means.¹⁶⁸ Thus the Assembly of 1852 ended quietly, there being no further discussion on college extension.

On 16 August 1852 Cunningham and Bannerman left Edinburgh for Amsterdam, arriving in Rotterdam three days later. The purpose of the trip was to work out the details for accepting a generous gift offered to the Free Church. An elderly woman, residing near Amsterdam, who had herself suffered religious persecution, desired to support the Free Church mission to the Jews in Amsterdam, and had offered a Church building in the central part of town along with five classrooms and an endowment of eighty pounds per year. The business took two days, was conducted in Dutch, English, French, and Latin, and was interspersed with food and tributes to Cunningham and Bannerman. The trip proved successful, not only due to the business accomplished, but also because it offered Cunningham a respite from his ordinary work and from the turmoil of the debate over college extension. It turned out to be a peculiarly happy and lighthearted time for Cunningham. He and Bannerman, who by now had become the closest of friends, traveled to many of the cities of the Calvinistic divines of the seventeenth century—Dort, Leyden, and Utrecht—and on to Frankfurt, Strassburg, and Paris. In the Senate Hall of the University of Leyden, wrote Bannerman, “We dressed up Dr Cunningham in a Dutch Professor’s gown and cocked hat, and put him into the chair.”¹⁶⁹ In Strasburg they lost their luggage, giving Bannerman opportunity “to dwell with exaggerative unction” on the “crestfallen air” of Cunningham, who prided himself in his ability to

¹⁶⁷*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1852, 121.

¹⁶⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 357.

¹⁶⁹*ibid.*, 390-393; *Witness*, 20 November 1852.

make successful travel arrangements.¹⁷⁰ This Bannerman did, not only when the luggage failed to show, but also the next morning when “they were forced to appear at breakfast in a dilapidated condition.”¹⁷¹ In Paris, Cunningham spent long hours sightseeing, paying special attention to the libraries. Finally, after Brussels, Waterloo, and Antwerp, the two travelers sailed for Hull.¹⁷²

Returning home, buoyant from his travels, Cunningham was greeted in England with the news of the death of his eighteen-month-old daughter, Elizabeth. He reached Scotland one day before the funeral, only to find his six-year-old son, Andrew, dying of the same illness. Within three or four days, Andrew too was dead. In a letter to his daughters, not present at the time, Cunningham wrote of his hope that God had been dealing with Andrew at the last, preparing him for heaven.

Little more than two hours before his death a very interesting and pleasing incident occurred. I proposed to pray with him, and when I began to speak he quite unexpectedly, and altogether of his own accord, repeated audibly the words after me, and continued to do so until I had finished. May the Lord enable us all to receive aright and improve these painful trials.¹⁷³

Cunningham also wrote Bannerman informing him of the loss of his children.

When I contrast the abundant enjoyment I had while with you on the continent, and, indeed, the goodness of all the way through which the Lord has led me, with this accumulation of sorrows, I feel that I have special reason to adopt the language of Job and to say, ‘Shall we receive good at the hand of the Lord, and shall we not receive evil.’¹⁷⁴

The death of his two children was soon to be followed by what Cunningham would consider the death of his dream. In the spring of 1853 he would enter the worst season of the debate over college extension, culminating in the most humiliating

¹⁷⁰Rainy, *Cunningham*, 393.

¹⁷¹*ibid.*

¹⁷²*ibid.*

¹⁷³*ibid.*, 394.

¹⁷⁴*ibid.*, 394-5.

defeat of his professional career. In October 1852 Maclagan died. By the end of November a call to discontinue Aberdeen College appeared in a local newspaper. During the next several months, presbyteries concurring with Cunningham's view of extension began overturing the Assembly questioning the validity of continuing the existence of the Aberdeen hall. In February 1853 notice was given of a motion to the same effect in Edinburgh presbytery. The ensuing debate was so long that it required two meetings to complete, the second of which took place on 14 April. Cunningham, largely responsible for the movement to reconsider the merit of the Aberdeen college, spoke to the motion and vindicated its propriety with brilliance, revealing a change of heart over concessions made previously.¹⁷⁵ He spoke of his "most anxious wish" to put an end to the "unspeakable misery" caused by the annual disturbances in the last Assemblies.¹⁷⁶ But,

I do not expect peace. I have been fully alive to the evils of these contentions. I have made sacrifices for the sake of peace. I have restrained myself on former occasions to some extent.... I have yielded to some extent my own judgment to the convictions and opinions of others. I have made concessions beyond what my judgment approved of. ... I have submitted to a good deal of insolence, publicly and privately, without retaliating, for the sake of peace. I have, for the sake of peace, or rather to prevent mischief to the college, seen it to be my duty to withdraw to a large extent from taking any part in the public business of the Church, just for the purpose of avoiding coming into collision with my opponents, and endeavouring to give them as little handle as I could. I have done these things for the sake of peace, and without the least success. And, just to speak plainly, I am tired, thoroughly tired, of this system of concession and expedients. (This was spoken with great emphasis, and was loudly cheered.) I cannot bear it any longer; and I just intend now to do what to my own judgment seems right, without much regard to consequences. (Applause.) I can assure the brethren that whatever I am doing just now, or whatever I may hereafter do in this matter, I do it, not certainly with any hope of being able either to avert evil or to effect good,—not, certainly, with any sanguine hope of attaining any object of a practical kind,—for I have long abandoned hope,—but just for the purpose of exonerating my own conscience, and escaping from the responsibility of measures of which I cannot approve. I support the transmission of the overture. (Applause.)¹⁷⁷

The motion passed by a vote of twenty five to twenty two.

¹⁷⁵*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1853, 122.

¹⁷⁶*Witness*, 16 April 1853.

¹⁷⁷*ibid.*

Cunningham, convinced by this time that Aberdeen would urge extension at every Assembly, had not only indicated a willingness to reopen old discussions, but had spoken in harsh terms, directing some of his most acerbic remarks against old friends. Five days after presbytery, Candlish, deeply offended by statements Cunningham had directed against him, wrote to Murray Dunlop. Referring to the outcome, Candlish stated that "The advocates of College Extension and of Aberdeen are naturally, and I think justly, incensed; and it will be difficult to moderate and to keep the peace."¹⁷⁸ At this point Candlish spoke of the possibility of not attending the Assembly. Several days later, however, Cunningham wrote to Candlish. Whatever the contents of that letter, Candlish informed Dunlop that he had "replied in a way as to prevent further mischief."¹⁷⁹ Candlish now decided to go to the Assembly, again informing Dunlop that, "I may hold my peace on the College question, and certainly will make no complaint."¹⁸⁰ By opening day of the Assembly, however, Candlish had changed his mind and decided to introduce a motion opposing that of Cunningham's.

On Saturday, 21 May 1853, two days into the Assembly meetings, Cunningham informed the gathering that Wednesday had been set apart for the debate over college extension. Citing a precedent in the General Assembly of 1839, he suggested that all motions to be made on the subject be laid on the table prior to their discussion. He was prepared to do so on Monday. Candlish concurred.¹⁸¹ Two days later Cunningham read his motion to the Assembly, requesting that body to appoint a committee to consider whether or not a theological institution should be continued at Aberdeen. This committee should also obtain the mind of the Church through the presbyteries and report to the next Assembly. In the interval, an interim professor should be appointed to assume the duties of the Chair of Theology left vacant by the death of Maclagan. Candlish then read his motion. The resolutions and acts of the

¹⁷⁸Wilson, *Candlish*, 482-3.

¹⁷⁹*ibid.*, 483.

¹⁸⁰*ibid.*

¹⁸¹*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1853, 34.

Assemblies of 1850, 1851, and 1852, should not, he moved, be interfered with. The General Assembly, accordingly, must resolve to replace Maclagan.¹⁸²

On Wednesday the debate began. Cunningham was the first to speak. Greeted with loud applause, he spoke to his motion.

I have resolved again to take the responsibility of introducing this painful and perplexing subject,— the most painful and perplexing, perhaps, which in the course of the last ten years this house has had to consider,—notwithstanding that I am well aware that in so doing I expose myself to a good deal of misconstruction and a good deal of obloquy. I have certainly never entered on the discharge of any duty under a deeper feeling of pain, and under a deeper sense of responsibility, than I do upon this; but I have firm and deliberate conviction, that in what I have done in this matter, and in what I am now doing in it, I am...doing what I can, as an office-bearer of this Church, to help in guiding the Church to a right and accurate view of what she ought at present to do.¹⁸³

Continuing, Cunningham spoke of the “extraordinary exertions” and “great amount of canvassing and correspondence” that had occurred in an effort privately to influence the vote. Greeted with loud and repeated cries of “hear, hear,” he went on to defend himself against many in various quarters who had recently sought to stifle the debate by decrying the evils of disputation, specifically the evils of Cunningham revisiting the merits of the Aberdeen institution. This tactic, he stated, is one that “men employ or not, as it may happen to suit their own purposes for the time. (Hear and applause.) It used to be,” moreover,

a standing maxim with us in the days of ‘The Ten Years’ Conflict,’ that when a man, in professing to discuss a question, talked a great deal about peace, and about the evils of contention, and the mischief of controversy,— when he gave to that the foremost and most prominent place in his statement,...that this was a sign of a bad cause—(applause)—that he talked so much about peace because he had nothing else to say—(laughter and applause)—and because he was unable to face the question on its merits.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸²ibid., 46-7.

¹⁸³ibid., 121.

¹⁸⁴ibid., 123.

There was a right side and a wrong side to most issues, he stated, and the best way to preserve the peace of the Church was to discuss the question thoroughly enough to reach a correct decision. His compromises of the past had been a mistake; the hoped-for hiatus from the debate had not and would not come. “Annual disturbances” to extend the provision at Aberdeen now seemed inevitable.¹⁸⁵ “It was very much the prospect of that,” he informed the house, “that really enabled me to screw up my courage to the sticking point—(laughter)—to break through the course of concession and timidity in which I had indulged for several years past, and to bring my mind to the conclusion, that the time was come when we must make a stand. (Great applause.)”¹⁸⁶

Speaking to his motion, Cunningham stated that purposes and proceedings of an earlier period should not necessarily determine present duty, nor should resolutions of an earlier period, specifically those of the last three Assemblies, preclude a full and deliberate discussion of the question of present duty when the occasion arises. One precedent in favor of this argument, he said, was the status of the once-envisioned Free Church University. The intent to establish a full Faculty of Arts in Edinburgh and a college at Aberdeen had both been expressed right after the Disruption, a time of great success, when no scheme seemed impossible. The intent to establish a full Faculty of Arts in Edinburgh, discussed at the same time, had, however, been more thoroughly enunciated and more strenuously attempted. Yet that effort has been practically abandoned, partly in light of a more reasonable understanding of the Church’s existing responsibility and means. Previous plans regarding Aberdeen were not, therefore, obligatory on the Free Church in her present situation. These plans, moreover, should be considered in light of the Church’s current duty and resources. This point, Cunningham supported by citing David Welsh, first convener of the Education Committee:

¹⁸⁵ibid., 124.

¹⁸⁶ibid., 123-4.

The Committee conceive it will be proper, in the first instance, with regard to college education, to aim at presenting a complete specimen of theological instruction. ... Time and experience will show whether after this, ‘—*after this*—’ the next step should be the establishment of a second institution....¹⁸⁷

A completed example of theological instruction had not yet been accomplished, Cunningham posited, due to the disturbances over college extension. The class of exegetical theology was not compulsory, and the Church had not yet ruled on a fifth theological professor. The timing was clearly inappropriate for extension, but more importantly, merit was being overlooked, made subordinate to previous commitment. “Let them try to shew the community,” he pleaded, “that this is not only obligatory, because the Church has been committed, but that it is right and reasonable upon the merits itself.”¹⁸⁸

By the time of this debate, the tide had turned in favor of extension, and Cunningham knew there was little hope for success with his motion. He fought for what he was absolutely convinced was the right path for the Church to take, in part out of a sense of duty to effect that result, in part to exonerate his own conscience. At one point, his despair was obvious: “let them bring the College to the hammer, let them make a kirk or a mill of it, if they like. I do not care one straw about the matter.”¹⁸⁹ The debate went late into the night. Cunningham rose again at a quarter past one o’clock, having been called upon by many voices to address the house. Having “assailed without mercy all who differed from him,” Cunningham apologized for some of his harsh comments during the proceedings. He did, however, still believe that there was no obligation upon the Free Church to maintain a theological institution at Aberdeen. If there were any sense of legal obligation, it had arisen through excessive pressure. “Of course,” he acknowledged with a touch of humor, “this implied that he had acted a weak and unworthy part in the whole matter; and if

¹⁸⁷ibid., 132-3.

¹⁸⁸ibid., 132-3, 149.

¹⁸⁹ibid., 150, 131.

that was the answer to be given to his position, of course he could not deny it. He must just confess it, and say—‘Tis true ‘tis pity, and pity ‘tis ‘tis true.’¹⁹⁰ In the end, Cunningham had spoken brilliantly, proving conclusively, according to one extensionist, that the Free Church was not in fact under obligation to extend the means of theological education beyond New College. But to many, the deliverances of previous Assemblies had created the expectation at least that extension, barring significant changes in the position of the Church, was a settled issue. Some, therefore, who had taken no position or who had agreed with Cunningham in the past, now determined to vote against him.¹⁹¹ The roll was called, and Cunningham lost by a vote of 222 to 147. Patrick Fairbairn, who had served as MacLagan’s assistant, was appointed to the chair of theology at Aberdeen.

This loss signaled the beginning of a succession of personal defeats for Cunningham, each one tending to embitter the man on whom Chalmers’s mantle had been placed. For the remaining two years of the controversy, Cunningham’s resolute efforts against extension met with little success. At the Assembly of 1854, Robert Buchanan, now convener of the College committee, moved the acceptance of 4,000 pounds, offered as completion of the initial gift of 2000 pounds for the endowment for a second chair at Aberdeen. Cunningham chose not to oppose the motion, proposing a rider instead. His amendment stated that the General Assembly would not by accepting this money be obligated to “maintain permanently, and in all circumstances,” a theological institution at Aberdeen.¹⁹² After his rider was characterized as rather “the *horse* that was to run away with the whole affair,” Cunningham was defeated by an even greater majority than that of the previous year—242 to 118.¹⁹³ After that, again against Cunningham’s opposition, the Assembly agreed to send down to presbyteries an overture stating that Aberdeen

¹⁹⁰ibid., 210-211.

¹⁹¹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 364.

¹⁹²*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1854, 21, 51, 66.

¹⁹³ibid., 86, 108.

should be established as a full hall upon the provision of three professors. Before doing so, however, the house unanimously voted to send down another overture which would formally establish the number of theological professors for New College at five. At the Assembly of 1855, both of these overtures were passed into standing law. Cunningham thus received the very thing he sought to complete the curriculum at New College at the same time he had to watch helplessly as the Free Church sacrificed her deliberate conception of a full curriculum for the expediency of establishing the Aberdeen college. The Church's willingness to accept three professors at Aberdeen justified, in Cunningham's mind, every statement he had ever voiced to the effect that college extension would inevitably result in lowered standards. Although he had chosen not to press to a vote the decision to establish the Aberdeen college, Cunningham nonetheless stated his complete dissatisfaction with the whole history of the debate and announced his decision to withdraw from the controversy. After decrying the "tremendous power of the formidable combination which now governed the Free Church," Cunningham stated that he felt himself exonerated and fully exempted from all future responsibility in opposing anything to do with extension or theological education.¹⁹⁴ He would, he concluded, "not again meddle with any of these matters."¹⁹⁵

Cunningham had never before retreated in defeat. He did so a bitter man, refusing to attend future Church courts. The controversy had elicited from Cunningham his best and worst traits—his masterful logic and his intemperate tongue. Sadly, it was his language and not his argument that had greater impact on the outcome and his own position in the Free Church. Out of frustration and a deep sense that the affairs of the Church and of New College were increasingly being controlled by a few individuals, he had often lashed out at his opponents. At one presbytery, when all seemed lost, he retaliated with sarcasm:

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*, 124.

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.*, 125.

let them have eight or ten Halls—(applause)—one of course at Aberdeen; one of course at Montrose—(laughter)—another of course at Perth—(renewed laughter)—and another of course at Dundee—(continued laughter)—and in that case he supposed they would have two in Edinburgh,—one for the Old Town and one for the New—(laughter)—and two for Glasgow,—one for the east end, and one for the west end. (Laughter and applause.)¹⁹⁶

Far more harmful, however, had been his personal attacks on once dear friends—notably, Robert Buchanan and especially Robert Candlish. He blamed these two men for raising the controversy in the first place and for bringing New College “to the verge of ruin” through their “management” of Church affairs.¹⁹⁷ Most of Cunningham’s speeches between 1853 and 1855 revealed his intent to discredit the leadership of Candlish and Buchanan in the public affairs of the Free Church. So angry was he at Candlish, that in 1855 he sent him a formal letter suspending their friendship. The two great leaders of the Free Church now became completely estranged.

Cunningham’s retreat from the public life of the Church was due in part to his sense that not only his friends, but also the majority of the Free Church, now looked at him with disapproval. In truth, many did blame him for the controversy. They took offense at his often resolute stance against extension, some accusing him of “popedom” with respect to New College.¹⁹⁸ Some were insulted by his harsh words against associates, others by what they perceived as his patronization of the majority of ministers, referring to them, wrote one Free Church minister, as “being led by the nose by two or three designing men.”¹⁹⁹ To some degree, the Church voiced its opinion in 1855 by refusing Cunningham the Clerkship of the Assembly, something under ordinary circumstances he could have had for the asking.

Cunningham’s impression of the Church, however, was more dour than warranted. Many on both sides of the extension question were quick to publicly praise

¹⁹⁶ *Witness*, 16 December 1854.

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Witness*, 13 January 1855; *A Crack about the College* (Edinburgh, 1855), 22.

¹⁹⁹ *A Crack about the College*, 24.

Cunningham, frequently attempting to assure him of their continued esteem. On one occasion Cunningham had suggested that if he were to resign as Principal of New College a majority of the Church would readily accept it. If it were accepted, one extensionist stated, “it would be the heaviest blow which the Free College, and the Church of which it is a beloved fruit, could at this moment sustain. Dr Cunningham...is at once the firmest pillar and brightest ornament of that institution.”²⁰⁰ Others rose in Church courts to defend Cunningham. Guthrie, for instance, at the Edinburgh presbytery, spoke against the accusation that Cunningham had impugned the character of the “leaders.” Cunningham, he stated, had impugned only their management and not their moral integrity. “Some men,” he continued,

meant a great deal more than they said; everybody knew that the Principal often said a great deal more than he meant. Some men’s words were smoother than butter, but mischief was in their hearts. The Principal’s words were rougher than—he did not know what—(a laugh)—and mischief was never in his heart. ... If there was a man standing head and shoulders high over all the ministers of the Church in downright blunt honesty, that man was Principal Cunningham. (Continued applause.) It was within the bounds of possibility—for it was human to err—that the Principal might, in the heat and fervour of debate, do and say what was wrong.... Had Dr Cunningham really done anything of the kind imputed to him, he would have been the first man to have retracted it. (Hear, hear.) Indeed, if the Principal had a fault at all, it was that he was too ready at retracting. (Laughter.)²⁰¹

At the same meeting of presbytery, William Hanna, Chalmers’s son-in-law and collegiate minister of Free St John’s, Edinburgh, also spoke in Cunningham’s defense.

He would not try to put himself in the position of Dr Cunningham—a man whom God in his providence had made successor to Dr Chalmers, and a man who had it left to him, as his chief heritage, to complete the plan of theological education which he had sketched out for the systematic study of theology. He should try to think how he would have felt when he found himself hampered and thwarted at every step and stage of this work, by the interposition of an inferior object. He did not wonder that Dr Cunningham had retired almost disgusted from the general business of the Church. But he could not thus throw up the business of the College.

²⁰⁰*Witness*, 10 February 1855.

²⁰¹*ibid.*, 13 January 1855.

(Hear, hear.) ... Nothing...that Dr Cunningham had said warranted the offensive interpretation that had been put upon it. Perhaps he (Dr Hanna) felt less at all these late events, and, in particular, felt less about all he had heard about the “leaders” of the Church, because for some years before Dr Chalmers’ death he had been accustomed to hear much more vehement phrases from him than any that Dr Cunningham had employed, but with this difference, that now they were directed to the leaders, while then they were directed to the lads. (Loud laughter.)²⁰²

In spite of abundant praise of his abilities and frequent defense of his actions, Cunningham entered a period of melancholy, frustrated in defeat, estranged from friends, disappointed in his own contribution to the strife, and filled with self-reproach for his inability to tame his tongue.

Cunningham had paid a high price in his attempt to establish one theological college that could serve the international Reformed community. With the successes of the Catholic Church under Pius IX, especially the rise of an assertive, Ultramontaine piety with emphasis on an authoritative Papacy, Cunningham was genuinely concerned about the danger this new spirit in Roman Catholicism posed to Protestantism. This new confidence was evidenced in Nicholas Wiseman, the first Archbishop of Westminster and Primate of England, and in Paul Cullen, Primate of Ireland from 1850. Such men had a clear view of Catholicism as a global faith, with strong centralized leadership from Rome, and destined to achieve the return of Britain to the ancient faith. Determined to resist a triumphalist Ultramontane Catholicism to his fullest ability, Cunningham evidently believed that Reformed Protestantism would need to marshal all its intellectual resources. The Free Church could afford only one great theological college, with the highest standards of scholarship and the best equipped library and lecture halls. Such a college would not only serve Scotland; it would act as a beacon for the Reformed world, educating students from all over the world and providing international leadership for what he viewed as the great struggle between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. A number of small, undistinguished colleges, serving only Scotland, could never achieve what one great college, serving

²⁰²ibid.

the Protestant world, could achieve. Defeated, Cunningham would now deliberately retreat from the public affairs of the Free Church, cloistering himself behind the walls of New College to focus almost entirely on his lectures, his students, and his writing.

6

RETREAT, REFORMATION, AND RECONCILIATION (1855-1861)

“He would regard his work for God accomplished, were he only able to lift Calvin up to the eminence and supremacy which once were his.”

I

On the day in 1845 when Cunningham was appointed to the Chair of Ecclesiastical History, a friend offered her congratulations and spoke of the satisfaction felt throughout the Free Church at the news. “Well,” replied Cunningham, “I’m told that some people are opposed to it on this ground, that I have no imagination. Don’t you think a want of imagination is rather a good feature in a historian?”¹ From the very beginning, Cunningham approached the teaching of Ecclesiastical History in a unique way, preferring the designation of Historical and Polemic Theology to that of Church History. His plan for teaching the subject marked a significant change from current practice at the older University seats and at New College. Typically, the professor surveyed the history of the Church through successive lectures, elaborating at points of interest and expertise.² Cunningham described a different method on 7 November 1850, as he delivered the introductory lecture on Church History to his students at the opening of the new session of New College. Although he noted that the Church in its broadest sense describes the worshippers of God since the fall of mankind, Cunningham intended to confine their course to the time period beginning at the apostolic era. The main object of his lectures was to

make the history of the church subservient to the purpose of assisting you to form clear and definite conceptions of the real meaning and import of the revelation which God has given us, and of the best mode of explaining, illustrating, and defending the truths which it unfolds. With this view, and, as it is necessary to make a selection among the vast variety of subjects which the history of the church embraces, the more formal lectures of the course will be restricted almost wholly to the history of theology, properly so called—that is, of the doctrines taught in Scripture,

¹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 225.

²*ibid.*, 226.

or professedly deduced from it, and of the discussions to which they have given rise—or what is now generally treated by continental writers as a distinct department, under the head of dogmatic history, or the history of dogmas; and, even under this head, our attention will be chiefly confined to a survey of those subjects of discussion, which still continue to divide the opinions of men and churches.³

His was a practical approach. Rather than lecture on the whole history of the Church, Cunningham used the classroom to relate the history of theological debate to the needs of present-day ministry, helping ministerial candidates to understand the Bible in areas of doctrine, Church practice, and pastoral duties. Guiding the student to an understanding of Scripture was, he believed, the primary purpose of theological education; everything was subservient to that purpose—the critical study of the Old and New Testaments, the systematic delineation of their contents, and the Church’s handling of their truths throughout history. Within the broad field of ecclesiastical history, moreover, “only the history of theology and of theological discussions...can be said to bear upon this important object.”⁴ A more general knowledge of the subject was to be acquired mainly from outside reading.⁵

Cunningham’s treatment of Church history would not be merely historical. Moving beyond the domain of dogmatic history, he intended to hold past theological discussions up to the “lamp of divine truth,” to determine the extent to which they concurred with the “unerring standard of the Word of God.”⁶ Although he believed that continental writers, especially those from Germany, had contributed more to the study of dogmatic history than all others, Cunningham was not satisfied with their unwillingness to evaluate, by the measure of Scripture, the historic doctrines they surveyed. Anyone desiring to “make up his mind upon theological questions...can scarcely regard men who prosecute the study of dogmatic history in this way...as any thing better than hewers of wood and drawers of water, whose labours are indeed

³Cunningham, *Introductory Lecture on Church History*, 7 November 1850, 64-66.

⁴*ibid.*, 67-68.

⁵On Thursdays, Cunningham provided his students detailed information on books which he expected them to read outside of class. Rainy, *Cunningham*, 223, 231.

⁶Cunningham, *Introductory Lecture on Church History*, 7 November 1850, 68.

useful and important in their sphere, but who occupy a very humble place in the erection of a well-founded, well-digested theology.”⁷ Continental writers, Cunningham argued, refrained from criticism out of a fear of polemics, something they regarded as having a tendency to corrupt the truth of history. Cunningham agreed that a “polemic spirit is sinful, and to be carefully guarded against, in so far as it is inconsistent with the royal law of love; and controversial discussion is at all times attended with some danger, as it often leads men to be guilty of violations of the laws of justice and candour, and tempts them to misconstrue or pervert the statements of Scripture and the facts of history.”⁸ “But,” he continued,

it must not be forgotten, that in regard to most, though not all, of the controversies which have agitated the church and influenced the progress of opinion, there was a right and a wrong side, even when neither party in the controversy may perhaps have been wholly right or wholly wrong, and that an investigation into the precise opinions which may, in point of fact, have been held and advocated by the different parties, is really important and valuable only in so far as it affords materials which may furnish some assistance in estimating aright the truth, the importance, and the relative bearings of the opinions that may have been broached.⁹

Cunningham distinguished his plan from that of other dogmatic historians at another point as well. He had mixed emotions about their attempts to explain the origin of certain doctrines by tracing them to various contexts. Examining features in natural character, in external circumstances, or in intellectual processes and influences is a legitimate and useful subject of investigation, which when carried out successfully can help to guard against the sources and occasions of error. It is rare, however, that definite conclusions can be made, and many attempts to do so, while displaying much ingenuity, have ended only in “fanciful conjectures possessed of no real value or solidity.”¹⁰ “I shall certainly make no attempt,” he continued, “to theorize about the origin of peculiar notions or opinions held by particular individuals

⁷ibid., 69.

⁸ibid., 69-70.

⁹ibid., 70.

¹⁰ibid.

or classes of men; but, having ascertained what opinions were actually maintained, and what were the grounds on which they were supported, will endeavour to render you some assistance in forming a right Scriptural estimate of their accuracy, importance, and bearings, and of the way in which the truth upon the point, if it be still a matter of controversy in the church, may be best defended and promoted, and the error may be most successfully refuted and discouraged.”¹¹

One thing remained in Cunningham’s approach to Church History—weighting the various truths arrived at in the study of theological discussions. His goal was to hit the right medium between what he described as “bigotry” and “latitudinarianism,” between “the extreme, on the one hand, of practically regarding almost all truth and all error as equally important, and unceremoniously denouncing as heretics men who were otherwise and in the main respectable and orthodox, but who may have been tempted to cherish doubts, or to embrace errors, upon some points of no great intrinsic importance; and the extreme, on the other hand, of treating differences of opinion that really involve important doctrinal principles, and in their full development affect important Scriptural truths, as if they were mere logomachies, and involved nothing vital or valuable.”¹² Concluding, Cunningham noted that,

There can be nothing acceptable to God, and honouring to Christ, nothing that is really the discharge of Christian duty, where there is not the spirit of love—of love to God and love to man; but it is of no small importance, especially in these times, that to the spirit of love there should be united the spirit of power and of a sound mind; and it is my earnest desire and prayer, that the study of ecclesiastical history, and especially of the history of theological discussions, may be blessed by the great Head of the church, not only for assisting you to form correct and intelligent views of divine truth, but for promoting, in combination with ardent zeal for the truth of God and the spiritual welfare of men, that enlargement of mind, that sound judgment, and that manly sense, which in their place are so important in guarding against errors and dangers, in making you workmen that need not be ashamed, and in securing the unity and efficiency of the church of the living God.¹³

¹¹ *ibid.*, 70-1.

¹² *ibid.*, 73.

¹³ *ibid.*, 77.

Cunningham's program for teaching Church History required that he master numerous volumes of historical literature. So many that his first session as Professor of Historical and Polemic Theology (1845-1846) arrived with lectures unwritten and arguments unprepared. The summer had been spent surveying materials for the course, and were it not for a singular ability to catalogue and recall information from memory, there would have been no Church History course that year. Cunningham spent three sessions developing his lectures, in addition to repeating his previous theology course more than once due to Chalmers's death. These requirements plus assuming more than his share of critiquing student essays meant that for much of three years he worked until 2:00, 3:00, or even 4:00 o'clock in the morning. By the end of the session in 1848, Cunningham was exhausted. It is doubtful that he ever recovered fully from the strain of those years preparing his course of history lectures.¹⁴

Cunningham's strenuous efforts, however, did provide the basis for his most important work, *Historical Theology*, published posthumously in two volumes by colleagues at New College. The introductory lecture of the first volume covered the same points he had delivered to his students on 7 November 1850. In addition, Cunningham wrote of the differing values he assigned to the various periods of Church history. "There can be no doubt," he wrote,

that much the most important period in the history of the church is the Reformation from Popery, and the period intervening between that great era and the present day. And the reason of this is, that at and since the Reformation, every topic in Christian theology, and indeed every branch of theological literature, has been discussed and cultivated with much greater ability and learning, or at least in a much more rational, systematic, and satisfactory way, than during the whole previous period of the church's history. There can, I think, be no reasonable doubt, that in point of intrinsic merit as authors, as successful labourers in expounding and establishing Christian truth, in bringing out clearly and intelligently, and in exhausting the various topics which they discussed, the Reformers and the divines who succeeded them are immeasurably superior to the theologians of preceding generations. In the respects to which I have referred,—and they are, beyond all question, the most important, so far as concerns the real value of authors and their writings,—the Fathers and the Schoolmen are mere children, compared with the Reformers and

¹⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 480, 225.

with the great Protestant divines of the seventeenth century. ... On the ground of this general truth, it is of much greater importance for all the proper ends of historical theology...to survey and investigate the history of theological literature and discussion during the last three, than during the preceding fourteen, centuries.¹⁵

Consistent with this view, nearly two-thirds of Cunningham's lectures covered the period extending from the Reformation to his day. The other third consisted mainly of great strides through momentous doctrinal disputes, key personalities, and significant systemic approaches to theology.

Cunningham's lectures and Cunningham himself proved immensely popular with students. Marcus Dods, for example, later Professor of New Testament Exegesis and Principal of New College, wrote his mother on 8 December 1855 about his teachers, just weeks into his first session as a student. "I enjoy his [Cunningham's] class very much, but find Dr. Buchanan painfully prolix."¹⁶ Students demonstrated their appreciation for their professor in several ways. Roll was rarely called, for instance, in his classroom. The crowded benches negated the need to do so. Many students also attended meetings of Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly when Cunningham was expected to appear. They filled the galleries of the Church courts, often boisterously supporting him, at times cheering his speeches and at other times hissing the speeches of his opponents, especially during the impassioned debates of the College controversy. Others later sought the publication of his theological lectures, originally delivered during Cunningham's first sessions at New College.¹⁷ Still others noted their respect for Cunningham in their memoirs or letters. Dods, in another letter to his mother, dated 23 February 1856, spoke of the high standard of Cunningham's coursework. "I have got my discourses for this year read," he wrote. "My Latin one for Dr. Cunningham cost me more thought than anything I have ever

¹⁵Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, i, 6-8.

¹⁶M. Dods, *Early Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1910), 73.

¹⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 232. In the preface of Cunningham's *Theological Lectures* is a letter to Cunningham's wife from thirty nine former students requesting that she make these class lectures available to the public.

done....”¹⁸ From the pen of Alexander Ross, a student at New College between 1856 and 1860, it is clear that Cunningham was highly esteemed at the professional and personal levels. Ross admired each of his professors, but Cunningham, he wrote, “was the greatest theologian I ever knew. I learned from him more than from all the professors put together.”¹⁹ Ross appreciated Cunningham’s lectures on Church history to such an extent that he attended all of his classes twice and credited them with enabling him to develop his theological method. “I learned from Dr. Cunningham...how to ascertain precisely the point in dispute, and thus to state the question to be argued. This being done, it is comparatively easy to get and arrange our reasons in support of the view we take, and also answer the question of opponents. Neglect the *status questionis*, [sic] and it will be all confusion....”²⁰ Ross’s regard for Cunningham’s abilities was matched by his affection for his character.

But I admired and loved Dr. Cunningham for his excellencies as a man, not to speak of him as a theologian. In public he had a most commanding aspect; dignity and authority sat on his every feature. In private he was meek and amiable, humble and straightforward: He would just say what he believed at once, and was then done with it. He loved simplicity.²¹

Ross was particularly moved by the effect on Cunningham of a tragic event that occurred during his first session at New College. Hugh Miller, after years of suffering with massive fibrosis of the lungs, brain disease, and bouts of depression, committed suicide. Cunningham had no more loyal supporter than Miller, who had allied the *Witness* with Cunningham during the College controversy. His death was deeply felt. “Oh how overwhelmed with grief he appeared to be,” Ross wrote, “when letting Hugh Miller’s coffin down into his grave and while the grave was being closed

¹⁸M. Dods, *Early Letters of Marcus Dods, D.D.*, 74-5.

¹⁹Mackmillan, K. and P., eds (1988), “Reminiscences of the Reverend Alexander Ross 1830-1919,” unpublished typescript, New College Library, 51, 62.

²⁰*ibid.*, 63.

²¹*ibid.*

in.”²²

As would be expected, Cunningham’s popularity with his students was not due to creative or eloquent pedagogic ability. Other features of his ability and personality, however, some of which Ross had written about, set Cunningham apart as a theological professor and attracted near worship from many of his students. First, he was very erudite in his field, mastering much of the literature of Church history, especially that of the Reformation period. The impression of most of his students, according to one, was that Cunningham “was in the theological *curriculum* perhaps more than Sir William Hamilton had been in the literary *curriculum*.”²³ Cunningham devoted extraordinary amounts of time to reading, and his encyclopedic memory enabled him to draw from this reading at a moment’s notice. Whether in the classroom or at a private gathering in his home, he was able to answer questions at great length, solving difficulties and even charming guests by the alacrity with which he discussed a topic.²⁴

Second, Cunningham’s lectures were full of powerful logic and obvious enthusiasm. Avowedly, he made ample use of scholastic methodology and distinctions. Although a small number of his students, not naturally systematic in their disposition, may have been repelled by his rigorously scientific approach, most benefited by it. One student, for example, argued that Cunningham’s “effectiveness as Professor of Theology was singularly great. Chalmers excelled him in making fervent evangelists. But we question whether he has ever been equaled by any other Scottish professor in impelling students to real and honest work as scientific theologians.”²⁵ Added to Cunningham’s exceptional reasoning ability was his deep conviction about the absolute importance of the subject matter, often resulting in a

²²ibid.

²³J. MacGregor, “Dr. William Cunningham,” *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, xx (October 1871), 783.

²⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 235.

²⁵MacGregor, “Dr. William Cunningham,” 783.

vehement ardor in the classroom. “I seem to see him even now,” stated one student, “seated at his desk reading his lectures, hurried along by the course of his argument like a torrent, his right arm swinging behind his desk, and his eye sometimes kindling into a glare of enthusiasm.”²⁶

Third, and perhaps at least as important as the first two reasons for Cunningham’s success in teaching, was his sincere concern for the welfare of his students.

Cunningham felt a deep sense of obligation to his students, to promote their best interests. At the General Assembly of 1851, he urged upon his colleagues this same obligation. Because of the uniqueness of the relationship between professor and student, he stated, “We ought to feel as strongly our responsibility and concern in the spiritual welfare of our theological students, as in the spiritual welfare of those who are our children according to the flesh.”²⁷ Careful attention to their needs, he hoped, would compensate to some degree for the physical separation of many students from their natural parents during their college years.²⁸ Cunningham’s dealings with his students, both in and out of the classroom, reflected his heartfelt desire to treat them as he would his own children. There was patience in the way he dealt with a student’s struggles and gentleness in his private conversation with them. One student noted the contrast between Cunningham’s almost violent denunciations in the classroom and his easygoing, approachable manner immediately afterwards in his office. “In this combination of the lion and the lamb, lies, I believe, in great measure, the secret of the extraordinary power which he came to have over many of us.”²⁹ There was also a surprising willingness in Cunningham to discuss a wide range of topics. A. B. Davidson, who later followed ‘Rabbi’ Duncan as Professor of Hebrew and Old Testament Exegesis, had numerous private conversations with Cunningham, more so than with his other teachers. Impressed by some of the new ideas of Biblical criticism

²⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 232.

²⁷*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1851, 170-1.

²⁸*ibid.*, 171.

²⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 234.

coming out of Germany, Davidson was at times astounded that Cunningham not only allowed him to broach those theories but that his professor could then converse with great breadth of mind about them. Cunningham's obvious interest in his students was reinforced by his remarkable memory, which enabled him to give his students the impression that he never forgot a name or a face. Referring to this ability in Cunningham, one of his students wrote of a rare occasion.

Only once in four sessions do I remember an effort required for a statement which he had to make. That was a very small matter. He was to mention the name of a student who was to read a discourse next day, but he could not recall the name. He hesitated, and turned over the leaves of his notebook, but the name was still refractory. He rose at length to pronounce the blessing and dismiss the class, conquered for the moment, but only for the moment, for when he had finished the words of blessing, the name was at command and duly intimated, amid the cheers of the class, who had hoped in vain to see him beaten for once.³⁰

Cunningham kept up with the careers of his students once they left the college. They were often surprised when they met him in later years and found him well acquainted with their progress in ministry.³¹

II

Cunningham, it will be recalled, retreated from the Church courts after the General Assembly of 1855. And now, with his Church history lectures in place, he found himself with time to write. Between 1855 and 1860 Cunningham edited the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, contributing numerous articles. The *Review* had begun in 1852 with the intent of countering what the publishers deemed to be the threat posed to evangelicalism by Roman Catholicism on the one hand, and a rationalistic skepticism on the other. Initially the *Review* made accessible to British readers articles in defense of evangelicalism which had previously appeared in

³⁰ibid., 235.

³¹ibid.

American and Continental journals, such as the *Princeton Review* and *Bibliotheca Sacra*. From the issue of March 1853, however, the journal included original as well as reprinted material. Covering philosophical, theological, biblical, and historical themes, the articles it contained were written to a high academic standard. The ten articles Cunningham contributed to the journal during the years of his editorship and in 1861, the last year of his life, were some of the best he had written. Pregnant with historical detail, these articles presented a mature and nuanced defense of Calvinism, interacting with what Cunningham perceived as contemporary assaults on the Reformers and their theology.

In April 1856 Cunningham's article on Martin Luther appeared in the *Review*. Provoked by recent criticisms of Luther by Sir William Hamilton, who had in several publications cited "rash and offensive" statements ascribed to the Reformer, Cunningham noted that this was the same tactic used in Roman Catholic polemics. "The great general position," he wrote, "which Romanists are anxious to establish by all they can collect against the Reformers, from their writings or their lives, from their sayings or their doings, is this, that it is very unlikely that God would employ *such* men in the accomplishment of any special work for the advancement of His gracious purposes."³² Protestant response to this "favorite allegation of Romanists," Cunningham continued, was threefold: first, the allegation was irrelevant—the Bible rather than the character of the person determines the real merits of the Protestant-Catholic controversy; second, the allegation was untrue—nothing about the character of the Reformers as a whole rendered them useless in God's economy; and third, the allegation could be applied "with far greater effect" to Catholics.³³ Cunningham confined his retort to the second of the Protestant responses. In doing so, he demonstrated a shift in his historical methodology, revealing an openness to contextual influences. "In dealing with the materials which papists have collected for

³²Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 98, 57.

³³*ibid.*, 57.

depreciating the character of the Reformers,...there are three steps in the process that ought to be attended to and discriminated, in order to our arriving at a just and fair conclusion:

1st, We must carefully ascertain the true facts of the case as to any statement or action that may have been ascribed to them or to any one of them; and we will find, in not a few instances, that the allegations found in ordinary popish works on the subject are inaccurate, defective, or exaggerated,—that the quotation is garbled and mutilated, or may be explained and modified by the context,—or that the action is erroneously or unfairly represented in some of its features or accompanying circumstances.

2d, When the real facts of the case are once ascertained, the next step should be to form a fair and reasonable estimate of what they really involve or imply, taking into account, as justice demands, the natural character and tendencies of the men individually, the circumstances in which they were placed, the influences to which they were subjected, the temptations to which they were exposed, and the general impressions and ordinary standard on such subjects in the age and country in which they lived.

3d, There is a third step necessary in order to form a right estimate of the common popish charges against the Reformers, and of the soundness of the conclusion which they wish to deduce from them, viz., that we should not confine our attention to their blemishes and infirmities, real or alleged, greater or smaller, but take a general view of their whole character and proceedings, embracing, as far as we have materials, all that they felt, and said, and did, and endeavour in this way to form a fair estimate of what were their predominating desires, motives, and objects, of what it was that they had really at heart, and of what was the standard by a regard to which they strove to regulate their conduct.³⁴

Cunningham utilized this evaluative process in this and future *Review* articles as he defended the character, actions, and doctrines of the key Reformers, especially Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Huldrych Zwingli. His defense of Calvin's notorious participation in the heresy trial and consequent death of Michael Servetus, for example, evidences each of these three steps. First, against the allegation that Calvin had long sought an opportunity to put Servetus to death, Cunningham convincingly demonstrated, after investigation of the sources cited as authorities for the allegation, the insufficiency of the evidence against him. He adduced one of the authorities, for instance, who himself acknowledged that there was only conjecture and no proof. Another "expressly admits that it could not be proved," and still another relied solely

³⁴ibid., 58-9.

on a statement made by Servetus at his trial.³⁵ Second, without defending Calvin's conduct toward Servetus, Cunningham showed that Protestants and Catholics alike almost universally held to the legality and responsibility of putting heretics to death at that time. Even two of the more moderate Reformers, both in theology and in character, Philip Melancthon and Johann Heinrich Bullinger, had given their full, formal approval. A Catholic tribunal at Vienne, moreover, had already convicted Servetus of heresy and had condemned him to die by a "slow" fire. Calvin, on the other hand, had at least exerted his influence in a failed attempt to have Servetus die in a less cruel manner. Third, Cunningham acknowledged defects of both character and doctrine in Calvin, disagreeing with Calvin's defenders who had attempted to clear his name from responsibility in Servetus's death. But these defects, he argued, did not present a balanced portrait of Calvin, not even of his dealings with Servetus. In the face of extreme provocation by Servetus, for example, Calvin had at one point, at the risk of his own life, exerted great effort to convince him of his errors, and having failed, he corresponded with Servetus for years on friendly terms in a continuing attempt to change his mind. In the end, Cunningham's lengthy and detailed defense of Calvin's dealings with Servetus revealed an intimate knowledge of the primary and secondary sources of the debate and was in fact a masterful demonstration of his historical method.³⁶

On the pages of his *Review* articles, Cunningham, with a tenacity reminiscent of his speeches and pamphlets during the "Ten Year's Conflict," proficiently defended the Reformers and their theology. He also revealed much about his own theology. Cunningham was looked upon by his colleagues as the scholastic Calvinist of the Free Church.³⁷ There is much in these articles to substantiate that characterization and much to negate it. In truth, Cunningham's theology, as found in his articles and

³⁵ibid., 324-5.

³⁶ibid., 305, 314-333.

³⁷See, for example, *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1851, 173; MacGregor, "Dr William Cunningham," 768.

classroom lectures, is more nuanced than that categorization would imply. Although resolutely loyal to the more developed, scholastic form of Calvinism of the seventeenth century, generally labeled Calvinist orthodoxy, he did on occasion disencumber earlier Reformed theology from its seventeenth-century accessions. And at times he disencumbered what he understood as Apostolic theology from the mistaken views of the Reformers.

Scholasticism, a form of Christian theology and philosophy which flourished during the medieval period of European history, attempted systematically to integrate ideas expressed in the writings of Roman and Greek philosophers, Scripture, the patristic fathers, and other Christian authors preceding the Middle Ages. Through careful arguments and precise definitions, the schoolmen, as these scholars came to be called, developed a model of argumentation relying on both faith and reason in an attempt to apprehend reality from a human perspective. A peculiarly Protestant model of scholasticism developed early in Protestantism and received widespread acceptance in the seventeenth century as a way to develop Protestant systematic theologies. Although the major Protestant Reformers assailed the theology of medieval scholasticism and called for total reliance on Scripture, doctrinal conflicts requiring complex theological reflection made the use of scholastic argumentation beneficial. Protestant scholastics, moreover, began to rely on reason to develop coherent theology from the great number of biblical texts. The *Institutio*, by the most important of the Reformed scholastics, Francis Turretin, became the standard work for nearly two centuries.

In Cunningham's lectures on Church history, he recognized the considerable influence that medieval scholasticism had exerted on both Catholic and Protestant theologians. The works of the scholastics were, therefore, worthy of study, and their theology and methodology worthy of critique. Negatively, the great defect of the schoolmen, argued Cunningham, was their reliance upon other standards than that of

Scripture to settle theological disputes. Prior to the age of scholasticism, it had already become common to appeal to tradition, the authority of the fathers, and the decrees of the popes and councils. The schoolmen, however, further corrupted this method of theological investigation by adding to these authorities “something resembling the rationalistic element of the supremacy of human reason,—not, indeed, that they formally and avowedly laid down this principle, but that their neglect of Scripture, and their unbounded indulgence in unwarranted and presumptuous speculations upon points in regard to which there could manifestly be no standard of appeal but just their own reasonings, had a tendency to encourage it.”³⁸ This endless discussion of questions, which inevitably resulted in speculation rather than solution, was the second great defect of scholastic theology. “The schoolmen,” Cunningham stated, “seem never to have entertained the question of settling the limits between what could be known and decided, and what could not....”³⁹

Positively, Cunningham appreciated both the goal and methodology of scholasticism. “The general object of the schoolmen,” he argued, “was to exhibit the substance of Christian truth in a systematic and connected order,—an object undoubtedly of the highest importance, and constituting indeed, when rightly accomplished, the crown and completion of the study of theology as science....”⁴⁰ And, though scholasticism did little to establish truth or expose error, it did significantly influence the way in which theology had been done since the medieval period. Many of their distinctions, he stated, have been successfully used by modern theologians to explain and defend various theological positions. Cunningham acknowledged that the Reformers, who generally avoided intricate theological discussions, made little use of scholastic distinctions and phraseology. But Protestant theologians, in subsequent times, faced with more subtle debates, found it necessary

³⁸Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, i, 415.

³⁹*ibid.*, 416.

⁴⁰*ibid.*, 414.

to have recourse to the scholastic dialectic. Of these theologians, Cunningham most prized Turretin, whose *Institutio* was a book of “inestimable value.” And even though the scholastic distinctions and phraseology may initially be difficult to understand, familiarity with these will enable the reader to “see more and more clearly how useful they are, in the hands of a man like Turretine, in bringing out the exact truth upon difficult and intricate questions, and especially in solving the objections of adversaries.”⁴¹

Cunningham often employed scholastic argumentation and distinctions and he clearly enjoyed being regarded as “the scholastic” of the Free Church, but he firmly believed that apart from methodology there was little difference between his theology and that of the Reformation.⁴² And for that matter, there was for him little difference between the theology of Calvin and that of seventeenth-century Calvinism. By the mid nineteenth century, some were alleging that, beginning with Calvin’s colleague and successor, Theodore Beza, theologians in the Reformed tradition, especially in the seventeenth century, significantly departed from Calvin’s theology. Cunningham challenged this view in an article for the *British and Evangelical Review*, appearing in July 1861, entitled, “Calvin and Beza.” Although he acknowledged that these theologians did further develop Calvin’s theology, Cunningham argued that Beza’s theology and that of the reformed confessions of the seventeenth century were essentially in line with Calvin’s thought. Alleged differences, he wrote, were over points on which Calvin never gave explicit deliverance, because they were not then subjects of discussion. Cunningham defended his thesis at three significant points of contention: the logical order of the decrees of predestination in the mind of God, the imputation of Adam’s first sin to his descendants, and the extent of the atonement.

First, with respect to predestination, it was argued that Beza believed that God first decreed to save some and to condemn others and then decreed the fall, while Calvin

⁴¹ibid., 419.

⁴²MacGregor, “Dr William Cunningham,” 768.

believed that God first decreed or permitted the fall and then decreed to save some and to condemn others. In other words, Beza held to the position of supralapsarianism, and Calvin to the position of infralapsarianism. On this point, Cunningham conceded that Beza, “in his explicit advocacy of Supralapsarianism, went beyond his master.”⁴³ Calvin, however, could not strictly be claimed by either side as an actual adherent. The preponderance of evidence was in favor of the infralapsarians, but Calvin, more cautious than Beza, insisted only on a doctrine of predestination to which all Calvinists would agree. Cunningham, more like Calvin than Beza, leaned toward infralapsarianism, but refused to speculate on the order of the decrees, not willing to go beyond what he believed was clearly described in Scripture. To do so, he argued, “runs up into topics which lie beyond the reach of our faculties, and which are not made known to us in Scripture.”⁴⁴ Although Beza differed from Calvin on this matter, most Calvinists on both sides of the issue, Cunningham wrote, “admitted that the difference involved nothing of material importance, and did not really affect the substance of any doctrine revealed in Scripture.”⁴⁵ Consistent with this view, the synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly, the “two most authoritative representatives of Calvinist theology,” left the question open, though the great majority of members on both councils were decidedly infralapsarian in their own convictions.⁴⁶

Second, regarding the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity, it was argued that while Calvin’s views were ambiguous, Beza’s were explicit, in full accordance with the more precise tenets generally held by Calvinistic theologians. The alleged differences between the two men centered on the theories which offer explanation for the “universal and pervading proneness or tendency to sin.”⁴⁷ Specifically, Beza

⁴³Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 349, 366.

⁴⁴*ibid.*, 364-6, 360-1.

⁴⁵*ibid.*, 363.

⁴⁶*ibid.*, 367-70.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, 371, 372.

argued that the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin was antecedent to and the cause of a person's sinful nature. This doctrine, referred to in the seventeenth century as the federal or representative headship of Adam, later comprised a significant part of the more developed covenant theology of scholastic Calvinism. Calvin, some argued, either rejected this position altogether or believed that Adam's sin was imputed, not directly, but as a "result of the moral depravity which is admitted to attach to men, in consequence somehow of their connection with Adam...."⁴⁸ Against this interpretation, Cunningham contended that Calvin held to the substance of the doctrine later developed by Beza, though he may not have used the definite formulations Calvinists subsequently came to employ. This was due to the status of the debate during the Reformation. "The course which the discussion of this whole subject took in his time," Cunningham wrote, "not only did not tend to lead his thoughts in that direction, but tended powerfully to lead them in what may be called an opposite one."⁴⁹ The doctrine of the fall of the human race in Adam has been a part of the creed of the universal Church throughout most of her history, but Albert Pighius, a leading Roman Catholic opponent of Calvin, "maintained that the guilt of Adam's first sin imputed constituted the *whole* of the sinfulness of the estate into which man fell; and...denied the transmission of an actually corrupt or depraved moral nature from Adam to his descendants...."⁵⁰ Calvin, therefore, gave more prominence, "in his expositions and discussions of this subject, to the transmission and actual universal prevalence of a depraved moral nature than to the imputation of Adam's sin, which was not then a subject of controversy."⁵¹ This was, Cunningham argued, the true explanation for Calvin's less definite formulations on the subject. Calvin, moreover, never explicitly or implicitly denied the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin to his posterity and, in fact, on numerous occasions plainly asserted it.

⁴⁸ibid., 375-6, 381.

⁴⁹ibid., 376.

⁵⁰ibid., 377.

⁵¹ibid., 378-9.

There is no reason, then, to fear that, in maintaining the higher and more precise views upon the subject..., which have been held by the great majority of the ablest and most accurate theologians, we may expose ourselves to the risk of having the venerable authority of Calvin adduced against us.⁵²

Third, concerning the extent of the atonement, Beza, and most Calvinists after him, held to the doctrine of a limited atonement or particular redemption, in which Christ died only for the elect. But Calvin, many alleged, asserted a universal atonement. On this point, Cunningham acknowledged that there were no explicit statements in Calvin's writings which pointed to any limitation in the object of atonement, but that there was sufficient evidence to deny that he held to a universal atonement.⁵³ "It is true," Cunningham noted,

that Calvin has often declared, that the offers and invitations of the gospel are addressed by God, and should be addressed by us, indiscriminately to all men, without distinction or exception; and that the principal and proximate cause why men to whom the gospel is preached finally perish, is their own sin and unbelief in putting away from them the word of life. But these are principles which the advocates of particular redemption believe to be true, and to be vitally important, and which they never hesitate to apply and to act upon....⁵⁴

Evidence that Calvin denied the position of universal atonement was twofold. First, Calvin "consistently, unhesitatingly, and explicitly denied the doctrine of God's universal grace and love to all men," in the sense that there was no purpose or intent to save each and every person.⁵⁵ And, Cunningham argued, the doctrine of an

⁵²ibid., 379.

⁵³For the view that Calvin taught a limited atonement, see R. Nicole, "John Calvin's View of the Extent of the Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal*, xlvii (1985), 197-225; for the view that Calvin taught an unlimited atonement, see A.C. Clifford, *Atonement and Justification: English Evangelical Theology 1640-1790* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990); and for the view, similar to Cunningham's, that Calvin did not explicitly address the subject, see R.A. Peterson, *Calvin's Doctrine of the Atonement* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1983).

⁵⁴Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 395-7. Cunningham's belief in both the free offer of the gospel and a limited atonement are also described in Cunningham, "The Atonement: Scripture Doctrine and Current Theories," *Sermons*, 393-416 and Cunningham, "Doctrine of the Atonement," *Historical Theology*, ii, 237-370.

⁵⁵A.C. Clifford, referring to this comment by Cunningham, states that "W. Cunningham was wrong to deny that Calvin taught a doctrine of common grace." Clifford, *Atonement and Justification*, 109. Cunningham, however, was referring to saving grace and not common grace.

unlimited atonement, as admitted by its supporters, stands inseparably connected with this doctrine of universal grace. Second, Calvin interpreted key texts, used by advocates of unlimited atonement to support their position, in such a way as to preclude those texts from providing that support. 1 John 2:2, for example, states that “He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.”⁵⁶ Here Calvin comments that John’s purpose in writing was not universal salvation, but simply to show that this benefit is available to the whole Church, to those who by faith embrace the gospel. Cunningham concluded this section with a practical appeal and a willingness to leave to God what he believed Scripture did not resolve.

The doctrine of particular redemption...does not...throw any greater obstacle in the way of preaching the gospel to every creature, than the doctrines which all Calvinists hold, of the absolute unconditional election of some men to eternal life, and of the indispensable necessity and determining influence of the special agency of the Holy Spirit in producing faith and conversion. The difficulty of this whole subject lies in a department which belongs to God’s province, and not to ours. He has imposed upon us the duty of making Christ known to our fellow-men, not only as able, but as willing and ready, to save unto the uttermost all that come unto God by Him....⁵⁷

At the end of the article, Cunningham offered mature reflections on the study of theology, pertaining to the use of views held by eminent theologians and of theological statements fashioned in the heat of controversy. “In almost all theological controversies,” he wrote, “much space has been occupied by the discussions of extracts from books and documents, adduced as authorities in support of the opinions maintained; and there is no department of theological literature in which so much ability and learning, so much time and strength, have been uselessly wasted, or in which so much controversial unfairness has been exhibited.”⁵⁸ Cunningham agreed of course with the study of historical theology and was especially pleased that so

⁵⁶Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 398-400.

⁵⁷*ibid.*, 401-2.

⁵⁸*ibid.*, 406.

much attention was then being given to “the full and scientific treatment of the history of doctrines” by scholars on the Continent.⁵⁹ It was important, he felt, to ascertain the significant doctrinal views which have prevailed throughout the history of the Church in every country where theology had been studied and to understand the views held by “epoch-making men.”⁶⁰ But, he cautioned,

no deference that may be shown to the opinions of men, should ever be transmuted into submission to authority, properly so called; as if it ever could be of essential importance, or of determining influence, to ascertain what other men believed on matters which are revealed to us in God’s word. No document has ever been prepared by uninspired men, which did not exhibit some traces of human imperfection,—not indeed always in actual positive error, yet in something about it defective or exaggerated, disproportionate or unsuitable,—exhibited either in the document itself, or in its relation to the purpose it was intended to serve. There is no man who has written much upon important and difficult subjects, and has not fallen occasionally into error, confusion, obscurity, and inconsistency....⁶¹

With this caveat in place, Cunningham noted that some historical figures were more worthy of study than others. With few exceptions, he wrote, time spent on the early Church Fathers could be regarded as nothing more than “learned lumber.”⁶² Of far more value were the writings of Augustine, the Reformers, especially Calvin, “the greatest of them all,” and finally, “the great systematic divines of the seventeenth century.”⁶³ From this last group of writers, the works of Francis Turretin, John Henry Heidegger, Herman Witsius, and Peter Van Mastricht “are based wholly upon the theology of the Reformation; but they carry it out to its completion, and may be said to form the crown and the keystone of theological science, viewed as an accurate, comprehensive, and systematic exposition and defence of the doctrines revealed in the word of God.”⁶⁴ In the writings of the Reformed scholastics, he continued, the discussion of Biblical doctrines “concerning all matters of universal and permanent

⁵⁹ibid., 406-7.

⁶⁰ibid., 407.

⁶¹ibid.

⁶²ibid., 408.

⁶³ibid., 411.

⁶⁴ibid.

importance, concerning God and man, Christ and the way of salvation, the church and the sacraments—is dealt with and disposed of,—is practically exhausted and conclusively determined.”⁶⁵ Controversialists working with their writings needed to remember, however, “that it is only the mature and deliberate conviction of a competent judge upon the precise point under consideration, that should be held as entitled to any deference.”⁶⁶ When dealing with historical authors, therefore, the theologian must first discern whether the writer being referenced has formed and expressed a decided opinion on the point under consideration; he must then examine carefully the whole of what that authority has written on the subject; and finally, he must be familiar with the significance of both sides of the issue at the time of the author whose works are being investigated.

Cunningham concluded on an ecumenical note, suggesting lessons from the history of controversy in the Church. Doctrinal debates should result in a fuller understanding of Scripture, but matters of minutiae, not clearly revealed in Scripture, should not be the subject of controversy. Nor should they, even if revealed in Scripture, be made terms of ordination to the ministry or grounds of communion among Churches. Calvin, he argued,

would probably have made a difficulty about adopting precise and definite deliverances on some points, concerning the truth of which the great Calvinistic divines of the seventeenth century had not hesitation. But it will probably be admitted that he was qualified for the office of a minister in a Calvinistic church, even in this advanced nineteenth century.⁶⁷

The objects to be finally aimed at were embodied in the famous maxim, adopted by Witsius as his favorite: “In necessariis unitas, in non necessariis libertas, in omnibus caritas” (unity in things necessary; liberty in things not necessary; in all things

⁶⁵ibid., 412.

⁶⁶ibid., 408.

⁶⁷ibid., 410, 412.

charity).⁶⁸

In two other articles for the *Review*, Cunningham separated Biblical theology from its scholastic additions. In the first, he distanced himself from Chalmers, and in the second, from Calvin. One aspect of scholasticism that Cunningham deplored was the intertwining of theology and philosophy. This was especially apparent in his article of January 1858, entitled, "Calvinism and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity," written in response to Sir William Hamilton's criticism of Chalmers. Simply stated, advocates of philosophical necessity, following Jonathan Edwards, offer a deterministic answer to the relationship between God's sovereignty and human free will, maintaining that "there is an invariable and necessary connection between men's motives and their volitions."⁶⁹ In other words, actions "are invariably determined by the last practical judgment of the understanding."⁷⁰ Therefore, God, who foreordains all things that come to pass, can guarantee that his goals will be accomplished freely because God's decrees include not only his chosen ends but also the means to those ends. "Such means," writes philosopher John Feinberg, "include whatever circumstances and factors are necessary to convince an individual (without constraint) that the act God has decreed is the act she or he wants to do. And, given the sufficient conditions, the person will do the act."⁷¹ Referring to Chalmers's near identification of necessity and predestination, Hamilton had argued in his *Discussions on*

⁶⁸ibid., 412. Historical theologian, J.R. Beeke, has noted the importance of Cunningham's defense of the continuity between Calvin and Beza: "...since 1950 there has been a snowballing of scholarly material advocating a supposed Calvin-Calvinist cleavage dating back to Theodore Beza. From Hans Weber through Ernst Bizer, and from Basil Hall to Walter Kickel and R.T. Kendall, Beza has been condemned as the father of Reformed scholasticism, who spoiled Calvin's theology by reading him through Aristotelian spectacles. ... Cunningham's nineteenth-century answer to this twentieth-century debate has never been directly countered to date, despite the fact that it was his most salient contribution to Reformation historiography." J.R. Beeke, "William Cunningham," *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, ed. by M. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman Publishers, 1996), 219.

⁶⁹Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 484.

⁷⁰ibid.

⁷¹J.S. Feinberg, "God Ordains All Things," *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom*, ed. by D. Basinger (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 26. This view of determinism is "often referred to as *soft determinism* or *compatibilism*, for free human action is seen as *compatible* with nonconstraining sufficient conditions which incline the will decisively in one way or another." Feinberg, *Predestination*, 24-5.

Philosophy and Literature that “nothing can be conceived more contrary to the doctrine of that great divine [Calvin] than what has latterly been promulgated as Calvinism...in our Calvinistic Church of Scotland.”⁷² This belief, he continued, was not only opposed to Calvin’s beliefs, but also to those contained in the Bible and in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Hamilton’s argument, of course, represented another version of the contention that later Calvinists had corrupted Calvin’s theology, now, however, specifically addressed to Scottish Calvinism. In Cunningham’s response, he refuted Hamilton’s argument, but he also disagreed with Chalmers’s entanglement of the philosophical notion of necessity with the theological doctrine of predestination.

Against Hamilton and Chalmers, Cunningham noted that nothing in the Bible either proves or disproves the doctrine of philosophical necessity. The Bible, in fact, “does not tell us anything about the causes or principles that ordinarily regulate or determine men’s general exercise of their natural power of volition.”⁷³ The psychological considerations of volition, moreover, were not subjects of Calvin’s contemplations or discourses. It could not, therefore, be determined whether he denied or held the position of philosophical necessity. Finally, Cunningham wrote, nothing in the Westminster Confession of Faith precludes someone from countenancing the doctrine of philosophical necessity; nor does anything in the confession require it. To prove that the Confession excludes the doctrine of philosophical necessity, it would be necessary to show that philosophical necessity compels people to do what their will detests, contrary to the Confession’s disclaimer that no violence is done to the will of people in God’s foreordination of all things. This is a view of the doctrine, Cunningham noted, that not even its opponents hold. To prove that the Confession requires the doctrine of philosophical necessity, it would be necessary to show that philosophical necessity is logically and necessarily deduced

⁷²Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 471.

⁷³*ibid.*, 482, 510.

from the doctrine of predestination. However, Cunningham wrote,

Predestination implies that the end or result is certain, and that adequate provision has been made for bringing it about. But it does not indicate anything as to what must be the nature of this provision in regard to the different classes of events which are taking place under God's government, including the volitions of rational and responsible beings.⁷⁴

Cunningham viewed the doctrine of necessity as a possible way in which God accomplishes his purposes without interfering with human will and moral responsibility. But he believed it to be a dangerous step to assume a certain connection between necessity and predestination. Chalmers's evident assumption that the two stand or fall together tended to lead people to regard the proof of one as dependent upon the proof of the other, thus elevating the doctrine of necessity to a place higher than it warranted and placing a burden on the doctrine of predestination to which it should not be subjected. Since it is a doctrine, Cunningham wrote, "which usually calls forth strong prejudices, and is assailed by plausible objections, it is right that we should beware of attempting to burden it with any weight which it is not bound to carry; or representing it as obliged to stand or fall with a doctrine so much inferior to it, at once in intrinsic importance, and in the kind and degree of evidence on which it rests."⁷⁵

Far more serious to Cunningham than scholastic intermingling of philosophy and theology was the medieval interpretation of the sacraments. In "Zwingle and the Doctrine of the Sacraments," appearing in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review* in October 1860, Cunningham argued that the "nature, design, and effects of the sacraments occupied a large share of the attention of the schoolmen; and, indeed, the exposition and development of the Romish and Tractarian doctrine upon this subject, may be justly regarded as one of the principal exhibitions of the antisciptural

⁷⁴ibid., 508-9.

⁷⁵ibid., 511-7.

views and the perverted ingenuity of the scholastic doctors.”⁷⁶ Against their doctrine of *ex opere operato* (the understanding that the sacraments contain the grace which they signify and confer it upon all who receive them, unless the recipients present a barrier to that grace), Cunningham held that the faith of the recipient was the necessary instrument by which God conferred grace through the sacraments.

Although he stood closer to the Reformers than the schoolmen in his view, Cunningham felt that the Reformers, influenced by their historical situation, tended to exaggerate the importance and efficacy of the sacraments. Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s Supper, for example, was “the greatest blot in the history of [his] labours as a public instructor.”⁷⁷ His attempt “to bring out something like a real influence exerted by Christ’s human nature upon the souls of believers, in connection with the dispensation of the Lord’s Supper...resulted only in what was about as unintelligible as Luther’s consubstantiation.”⁷⁸ Cunningham was more sympathetic to Zwingli’s doctrine of the sacraments.

It was in the highest degree honourable to Zwingli that he so entirely threw off the huge mass of extravagant absurdity and unintelligible mysticism which, from a very early period, had been gathering round the subject of the sacraments, and which had reached its full height in the authorised doctrine of the Church of Rome. ... Zwingli’s rejection of the whole of the erroneous and dangerous doctrine in regard to the sacraments which had been inculcated by the schoolmen, and sanctioned by the Church of Rome, was, in the circumstances in which he was placed, one of the most arduous and honourable, and, in its consequences, one of the most important and beneficial achievements which the history of the church records.⁷⁹

Cunningham did acknowledge, however, that Zwingli fell short of the truth in his doctrine of the nature and efficacy of the sacraments. Although in his later writings he may have moved beyond a near memorial view, Zwingli did not fully bring out the spiritual blessings God intends to bestow through the sacraments to those who by

⁷⁶ibid., 233.

⁷⁷ibid., 240.

⁷⁸ibid.

⁷⁹ibid., 228.

faith will receive them.

In the same article, Cunningham defended the Westminster Shorter Catechism against the allegation that it, in agreement with the Church of Rome, teaches baptismal regeneration.⁸⁰ “This doctrine,” Cunningham wrote, “whatever else it may include, is always understood to imply, that all baptized infants are regenerated. Now there is nothing in the ‘Shorter Catechism’ which gives any countenance as to the bearing upon infants.”⁸¹ The only possible ground for alleging that the catechism teaches baptismal regeneration, Cunningham continued, would be that its statements on the sacraments apply to all who have been baptized. Thus, for example, the description of baptism as a sacrament which signifies and seals “our ingrafting into Christ, our partaking of the benefits of the covenant of grace, and our engagement to be the Lord’s” must apply equally to adults as well as infants. Cunningham, however, in a rather remarkable interpretation of the catechism, argued that these descriptions applied only to believers. The statement that “baptism signifies and seals *our* ingrafting into Christ,” he wrote, must mean, “that it signifies and seals the ingrafting into Christ OF THOSE OF US who have been ingrafted into Christ by faith. This construction, of course, removes all appearance of the catechism teaching baptismal regeneration.”⁸² “The Westminster divines, then, have given a description of a sacrament...which does not directly...comprehend infant baptism. ... This is the only explanation and defence that can be given of the course of statement adopted in the catechism.”⁸³

III

In 1858, after three years of retreat from the public life of the Free Church,

⁸⁰Historical theologian D.F. Wright, in a paper presented at the “Colloquium on Calvin Studies” held 26-27 January 1996 at Davidson College, has argued that the Westminster Confession teaches a form of baptismal regeneration.

⁸¹Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 242.

⁸²*ibid.*, 244.

⁸³*ibid.*, 250.

Cunningham suddenly lost the sight in his right eye. He did not realize, however, that the sight was gone until one night while out at dinner. After spilling some of the wine he was pouring, he returned home and tested his sight by covering one eye at a time. When he discovered that he was blind in his right eye, he sought medical treatment, but to no avail. A small blood vessel in the back part of his eye had burst, leaving the eye permanently useless. Just before the opening of the session at New College in November, the Church became aware of his partial blindness. Cunningham's condition elicited widespread sympathy, both out of a sense of obligation to his many years of service to the Free Church and out of a desire to assure him that, in spite of the controversy over college extension, he was still highly esteemed. Candlish, on the day he heard of Cunningham's situation, wrote to him immediately, using the old familiar form of address he had stopped using when their friendship had been suspended. "My dear Cunningham," the letter began, and then it continued with an expression of sympathy and an offer to help.⁸⁴ After sending the letter by special messenger, Candlish became worried about how Cunningham might receive the letter, wondering if it might make matters worse between them. Candlish, therefore, on the same evening, wrote to Guthrie, who lived near Cunningham, asking him to call on Cunningham the next day to determine Cunningham's response. In the morning, Candlish received a letter from Guthrie, stating that Cunningham had been "quite melted."⁸⁵ Without explanation or apologies, the estrangement was over.

On 22 September 1858, Candlish wrote to Robert Buchanan informing him that a friend had seen Cunningham and his wife on several occasions during the last few days and had said that "both of them are much depressed and cast down."⁸⁶ At the time Cunningham was anxious about losing the sight in his other eye, which his doctor had warned him was a real possibility. Although this fear later eased, and he

⁸⁴Rainy, *Cunningham*, 404-6; W. Wilson, *Memorials of Robert Smith Candlish, D.D.* (Edinburgh, 1880), 513.

⁸⁵Rainy, *Cunningham*, 406; Wilson, *Candlish*, 513.

⁸⁶Wilson, *Candlish*, 514.

did retain the sight in his left eye, he labored for a time under great disquiet. Candlish found out that Cunningham had considered going to Germany to see a specialist, but did not have the means to go. Candlish, therefore, initiated an effort to raise several hundred pounds to enable Cunningham to take the trip. George Dalziel, a barrister and friend of the Free Church, then got involved and changed the scope of the fund. Dalziel saw Cunningham's situation as an opportunity for the Free Church to thank him for his years of extraordinary service and to do so in such a way as to provide financially for Cunningham's family in the event Cunningham could no longer do so. Seeking to raise at least 5000 pounds, a circular was sent privately to many in the Church. The circular recognized some of Cunningham's significant contributions to the Church, acknowledging that without him, "the course of our history might have been very different from what it has been."⁸⁷ Guthrie contributed the concluding sentence. "And we owe it to the Church of Christ, to prove to the world, that while, as was exhibited at the Disruption, there is such a thing as public principle, there is also such a thing as public gratitude."⁸⁸ In the end, over 7000 pounds were raised. Cunningham was amazed at the gift, but he received it as an indication of both appreciation for his public service to the Church and as an expression of personal affection for him, the latter meaning more to him than the former.

Cunningham's reentry into the public life of the Church was cemented in November 1858. As the Commission of the General Assembly approached, many in the Free Church were of the decided opinion that Cunningham should be the next moderator. On Wednesday, 15 November, he was unanimously nominated. Later that day, Alexander Beith, the current moderator, Guthrie, and Candlish, breaking with tradition, delivered the nomination to Cunningham in person. When Beith informed Cunningham of the reason for their visit, there was silence for a minute or

⁸⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 410-11; Wilson, *Candlish*, 514; Subscription Circular, for W. Cunningham (NCL), 1.

⁸⁸ Subscription Circular, for W. Cunningham (NCL), 2.

two. Then Guthrie could stand it no longer. “I tell you what it is gentlemen,” he said,

if Dr Cunningham refuse you, *Come to me*—I’ll not refuse you ! Do you know, a lady said to me only yesterday, “Dr Guthrie, if they make you Moderator, I’ll give 200 [pounds] a-year to the Sustentation Fund. I give already what I think becomes me, but I will give what I have said if they make you Moderator.” Think of that, gentlemen. If Dr Cunningham says No, *Come to me!*⁸⁹

With that, they all broke into a laugh, and Cunningham, when able to speak, told them that he had been totally unprepared for the offer. “He counted this the highest honour the Church and his brethren could confer on him....”⁹⁰

At twelve o’ clock, on Thursday, 19 May 1859, Beith, as retiring moderator, took the chair at the General Assembly, now meeting for the first time in the new hall on Castle Hill. Then, after preaching from Matthew 6:10 (“Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”), he called the attention of the house to the incoming moderator. In a brief speech, Beith lauded Cunningham, citing his extraordinary ability and exemplary character. “As to all these points,” he continued, “Dr Cunningham’s celebrity is not Scottish merely, nor British, but European and world-wide. ... I have,” he concluded, “the honour to propose Principal Cunningham as the Moderator of this Assembly.”⁹¹ The response of the hall was overwhelming, often interrupting the speech with applause and prolonged cheers. The Free Church was consciously welcoming Cunningham back to the arena in which he had rendered such great service. In the seconding speech, Lord Panmure reminded the Assembly of the principles of the Disruption.

I think that this is a fitting occasion for us mentally to renew those vows; and in selecting William Cunningham to be our Moderator—(loud cheers)—I am sure it is needless to remind this Assembly that none contended for those great and sacred principles more nobly, more eloquently,

⁸⁹Rainy, *Cunningham*, 406-8.

⁹⁰*ibid.*, 408.

⁹¹*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1859, 9-10.

more courageously than did William Cunningham. (Prolonged cheers.) The letter C was famous in the Free Church alphabet. (Cheers.) Chalmers, Cunningham, Candlish—(renewed cheers)—were those three eminent men who met every argument that was raised against our principles with eloquence and conviction that spread itself over the land; and when our principles were assailed on the score of their theological bearing, I have only to call to your recollection that most acute pamphlet written by William Cunningham to confute the assertions of one now no more, and which did more, I believe, to convince men's minds of the righteousness of the cause of the Free Church than almost any other publication. (Applause.)⁹²

According to the accepted practice, Cunningham was then conducted into the Assembly by the seconder and the clerk. At his entrance, wrote one observer, the members rose in one body to welcome him,

every eye gazing at him with affectionate sympathy, the green shade at once indicating his indisposition, and partially concealing his emotion, few will ever forget his bow as he took the Chair. It seemed as if he flung from him a load of gratitude which was almost weighing him to the earth, and which he now discharged on those to whom he believed it to be due. I never imagined that so much meaning could be expressed by a gesture.⁹³

In Cunningham's speech, it was apparent that he viewed his reconciliation with Candlish and other members of the Church and his then being called to this position as more than just a human result. They represented, he stated, "a token that the Lord is still waiting to be gracious towards us; that He is not dealing with us as we had deserved; that, as on many former occasions, He has again been disappointing our fears and surpassing our expectations...."⁹⁴ To Cunningham, who had been depressed for some time, not only the Free Church, but God himself was welcoming him back to an active role in the public life of the Church. Now, with renewed vigor, he made an earnest plea for the Church to focus on "the great ends of the Christian Church,—the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the effusion of the Holy Spirit, the renovation and

⁹²ibid., 10-11. The pamphlet of Cunningham's referred to is no doubt, *The Defence of the Rights of the Christian People*, which was a response to *Observations on the Veto Law*, written by Robertson of Ellon.

⁹³Rainy, *Cunningham*, 416.

⁹⁴*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1859, 12.

sanctification of human souls.”⁹⁵

To this end, Cunningham called attention to the revival then occurring in America:

There can be no reasonable doubt that this has been a very remarkable outpouring of the Holy Ghost given in answer to believing prayer, and making the preaching of the gospel effectual for the conversion of many thousands of immortal beings. This has been going on for a long period of time, over a vast extent of country, and among all the different evangelical Churches. There has not, so far as I know, been anything that might be compared with this since the great Reformation of the sixteenth century; and this of itself is sufficient to shew that it is pre-eminently worthy of the attention of the Churches of Christ.⁹⁶

Continuing, Cunningham noted that Great Britain and the United States were the only countries in the world in which Christianity’s influence was pervasive, and that “true personal religion” seemed to be about as generally diffused in the one country as the other.⁹⁷ But, he stated, religion in America had been largely produced by revivals, while religion in Britain had been mainly produced by “a more quiet and gradual process,” though Britain was not without occasional “outpourings of the Spirit.”⁹⁸ Cunningham then suggested the use of *Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England*, an evaluation, written by Jonathan Edwards, of the American revival which occurred in the early part of the eighteenth century. This book, he said, would help them to form a just estimate of the current more extensive revival and would foster a sense of obligation to give more consideration to this “great work of God...which has not yet excited the attention or produced the practical results in this country which might reasonably have been expected from it....”⁹⁹ Concluding, Cunningham noted the dearth of Christianity in places like China, India, continental Europe, and even Scotland, and called for renewed efforts in foreign missions. “Let it be the one great desire of our hearts,” he pleaded, “that God would

⁹⁵ibid., 14.

⁹⁶ibid.

⁹⁷ibid., 14.

⁹⁸ibid.

⁹⁹ibid., 15.

pour out His Spirit everywhere abundantly, in connexion with the preaching of the gospel....”¹⁰⁰

Cunningham’s remaining years were perhaps the most peaceful of his professional life. Restored to old friends and to the Free Church, he also enjoyed the liberty of involving himself only in matters of personal interest, while at the same time leaving the burden of details to others. He became something of an oracle to the Free Church, a general adviser, who was “by common consent the supremely great master of her principles, and distinctively and grandly the theologian of his Church.”¹⁰¹ His Assembly speeches in 1859 and 1860 were devoted to commemorating the beginning of the Reformation in France and Scotland, respectively. Speaking at the Assembly of 1860, Cunningham reiterated his belief that Calvinism was consistent with the truths contained in the Bible:

It would be no difficult matter to shew that one whose mind was filled with the truths set forth in the Word of God, who was able to take a comprehensive view of the condition of things before the Reformation began, and to contrast them with what was stated in that Word, would come to the conclusion that the only real and effectual cure for the fearful condition of things that then prevailed was to go back at once, without hesitation, without palliation, without any attempt to stop at intermediate positions—to go back decidedly to the Calvinism and Presbyterianism of God’s own Word.¹⁰²

There is no evidence in this speech or in any other during the last years of Cunningham’s life that he ever changed his view that theology had reached its highest point of development in Calvinism, especially that of the seventeenth century. “There are some,” he argued in his Assembly speech of 1860, “who profess to be men of great progress, and to have made great advances and discoveries in theology; but the great evidence of this progress they give is usually to wrap up everything in confusion and obscurity.”¹⁰³ Nor is there any evidence that Cunningham was affected by the

¹⁰⁰ibid., 16.

¹⁰¹MacGregor, “Dr. William Cunningham,” 780, 782.

¹⁰²*Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1860, 139.

¹⁰³ibid., 141.

views of higher criticism coming primarily from Germany. He was familiar with the work of the German Romantic theologian, F.D.E. Schleiermacher, who, had contributed to a more critical approach to the Bible with his questioning of its inspiration and authority. Cunningham acknowledged that Schleiermacher “had had a great deal of influence,” but, he stated, that influence was “to some extent for evil and to some extent for good.”¹⁰⁴ Cunningham, himself, remained pre-Critical, in his view of Scripture.¹⁰⁵

In addition to praising the theologians and the theology of the Reformation in these speeches, Cunningham increasingly called for unity amongst the various Presbyterian bodies. “With all those who stand on an intelligent Calvinism and Presbyterianism,” he stated at the Assembly of 1860, “we may surely enter into friendly relation, bid them God speed in their work, and give them every assistance in our power.”¹⁰⁶ At the Assembly of 1861 he repeated this cry for unity, specifically countenancing the proposed formal union of the various Presbyterian Churches in Australia. On Thursday, 30 May 1861, after the debate on this question had been going on for hours, Cunningham rose to speak around midnight, at the urging of those around him. Another minister caught the Moderator’s eye first, however, and was given the chair, amidst loud calls for Cunningham. The speech was brief, and then, with loud and prolonged cheers, Cunningham rose a second time. With a mastery of debate typical of Cunningham, he cleared away extraneous issues, removed objections, and finally gave reasons in support of the union. His speech finished the debate, and the house voted nearly six to one in favor of the motion he supported. A rural minister, who had been greatly concerned that the debate would wreak havoc in the Assembly, came into the hall the next morning and unburdened himself to a fellow minister: “was not

¹⁰⁴ibid., 142.

¹⁰⁵For further reading on Cunningham’s view of the doctrine of Scripture, see N.R. Needham, *The Doctrine of Holy Scripture in the Free Church Fathers* (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1991); R.A. Riesen, *Criticism and Faith in Late Victorian Scotland: A.B. Davidson, William Robertson, and George Adam Smith* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1985).

¹⁰⁶Rainy, *Cunningham*, 425; *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1860, 142.

yon a wonderful speech of the Principal's? a wonderful speech! I have got no sleep all night thinking of that verse of the Psalm:—'Then Phinehas rose, and judgment did, And so the plague was stayed!'"¹⁰⁷ It was a truly great Assembly speech; it was also his last.

On Wednesday, 4 December 1861, Cunningham felt sick and unable to teach his classes at New College. Remaining home, he summoned his doctor, who diagnosed a bilious attack. Cunningham stayed at his house until Monday when he returned to college and performed his normal duties. The day's work exhausted him, however, and he retired early that evening. Throughout the week his condition worsened, taking on the symptoms of pleurisy. On Friday, 13 December 1861, Robert Rainy, pastor of the Free High Church, where Cunningham worshipped, stopped in at Cunningham's home at 17 Salisbury Road. At the doctor's request, Rainy informed Cunningham that he would probably not live through the night. Although Cunningham was unprepared for the message, "he seemed at once to adjust himself to his position."¹⁰⁸ During the conversation, Cunningham's colleagues, James Bannerman and James Buchanan arrived. Cunningham explained his situation and thanked them for their loyal friendship. He then requested that they take charge of his papers, lectures, and manuscripts, doing with them whatever was in the best interests of the Church and of his family. When asked if he had any message for his students, he replied, "let them give themselves first to Christ, and then dedicate their whole lives to His service, seeking to be able and faithful ministers of the New Testament, not of the letter but of the spirit."¹⁰⁹ At their departure, Cunningham told Buchanan and Bannerman twice that "We shall meet at the right hand."¹¹⁰ The last few hours of Cunningham's life were spent with his family, comforting them and instructing them about future responsibilities. After 10:00 o'clock, his mind began to wander, and he

¹⁰⁷Rainy, *Cunningham*, 453-9; *Proceedings of the Free Church of Scotland*, 1861, 221-35.

¹⁰⁸Rainy, *Cunningham*, 467-72.

¹⁰⁹*ibid.*, 473-4.

¹¹⁰*ibid.*, 474.

seemed to be moving among the people and events of the Reformation. At one point, with a demonstrative motion of his hand, he said, “it was strange that so good a man should have been left to do such an act.”¹¹¹ Evidently referring to Calvin’s involvement with Servetus’s death, he later believed that he was Calvin and cried out, “I did not kill Servetus.”¹¹² Coming back to his senses and seeing his family gathered around him, he told them, “I have done with fighting; I am going quietly home.”¹¹³ Moments later, just into the new day, Cunningham died, apparently without pain and with little struggle.

Cunningham was buried in Edinburgh on Wednesday, 18 December 1861. The funeral service was held at the Free High Church, with sermons from both Robert Rainy and James Buchanan. Following the service, a procession of mourners, including the Magistrate and Town Council, the Edinburgh presbytery, the Senatus and students of New College, members of the Free High Church congregation, representatives from nearly every Protestant denomination, friends, and family walked slowly from Cunningham’s home on Salisbury Road to the Grange Cemetery. The entire route was lined with people crowded together to witness the event. On that occasion, Candlish commemorated his friend:

The roll of her departed worthies has from year to year been lengthening with terrible rapidity. And now a name is added that will never have another written after it so noble or so dear. To me personally the stroke comes very near; so near, that it may well take away my breath. My equal in age, only a few months between us; my close companion from the beginning of my ministry; my frequent counselor and helper, on whose strength of judgment and exhaustless store of ever ready learning I have been wont to draw; my brother in arms,—can I see him fall before me, and not stand appalled? ... He who has last gone to his rest was, I might almost say, the pillar among us; always straight, and staunch, and firm.¹¹⁴

¹¹¹James Bonar to John Bonar, 16 December 1861 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 119-20).

¹¹²*Witness*, 18 December 1861.

¹¹³*ibid.*

¹¹⁴*ibid.*

CONCLUSION

“...his name will be permanently embalmed in the history of the Church in connection with that of CALVIN, of whose peculiar views, in regard alike to Christian doctrine and ecclesiastical polity, he was a most strenuous, consistent, and judicious advocate.”

Cunningham, “with marked decision,...used to declare that the only credit due to him, either in the pulpit or the chair, was ‘this, and no more; that he had resuscitated Reformation doctrine, like Hodge, and caused the Churches to look at it in its noble features....’”¹ Cunningham had, in fact, devoted the better part of his life to the recovery of the theology of the Reformation, especially as developed and codified in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Convinced of the need for this during the Evangelical revival of his college days, Cunningham later exhausted himself in controversy-filled years of service as preacher, Churchman, Professor, and Principal.

I

As preacher, Cunningham exhorted his flock with biblical expositions of Reformation theology. Consistent with Evangelical preachers of his day, Cunningham included in his sermons the Reformers’ emphasis on the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith in Christ. “We must never forget,” he stated, “that the doctrine of the Cross of Jesus Christ and Him Crucified is the great Central point, in which all the diverging lines of Christian truth ultimately meet.”² The death of Christ as an atonement for sins, moreover, is the foundation...of the whole scheme of salvation.”³ That did not mean, however, that the preacher should limit his expositions to this single subject,

¹ Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxi.

² Cunningham, *Sermons*, 126.

³ *ibid.*, 123.

but simply, that this was the great Cardinal principle which ought to be kept constantly in view,—which ought to direct and regulate the general character and object of ministerial addresses,—which, in spirit, at least, ought to pervade them all,—which ought to be the sum and substance of our knowledge of divine truths,—and ought to furnish the great animating principle of our practical conduct.⁴

In truth, Cunningham can be faulted for limiting the range of topics in his preaching. Rarely straying from the central doctrines of salvation, his sermons evidenced little variety of theme. His close friend, John Bonar, in his preface to Cunningham's posthumously-published sermons, portrayed this as a positive attribute:

Let any one read the first and the last Sermons in this volume...and he will perceive that it is the same truth he unfolds, and the same motives he appeals to, and the same duties he inculcates throughout.... ...he was most jealous of speculation when it appeared on the domain of Christian doctrine, and his test for it was instinctively: 'Can it save?'⁵

Notwithstanding Bonar's perceptions, the restricted nature of Cunningham's sermon topics resulted in a presentation that, in its totality, truncated the content of Scripture and of Reformed theology. Two practices accounted for this: first, though Cunningham continued to preach throughout his life, averaging about sixty times a year, he repeated his old sermons wherever possible. This was done, wrote Bonar, because Cunningham believed "that he needed to counteract the love of novelty, which was creeping in, by the exhibition of plain truth...."⁶ Although Cunningham opposed novel theology—in preaching or elsewhere—time constraints and increasing interest in matters beyond the realm of the pastorate were probably more responsible for the repetition of sermons. As a result, the scope of Cunningham's sermon topics was limited, inadequately reflecting the breadth of his knowledge as well as the

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xvii.

⁶ *ibid.*, xxxi.

greater body of Reformation and biblical thought.

A second and more significant reason for Cunningham's limited subject matter in preaching was his method of selecting Scripture for the messages. Rather than working through a book of the Bible, allowing the variety in the text to dictate the subject from week to week, Cunningham evidently chose texts that addressed the subjects on which he desired to preach. That practice, joined by his customary use of only one verse of Scripture per discourse, not only restricted the diversity in his sermons, but also overlooked the various emphases and nuances in different passages and even whole books of the Bible. His tendency to reduce preaching to proof texting meant that Cunningham often determined *a priori*, based on his views in systematic theology, the doctrines he wished to preach and the aspects of those doctrines he wished to present. Thus, while Cunningham stressed the need for careful biblical exegesis, relying on a competent knowledge of the original languages, his method of Scripture selection mitigated against many of the benefits that should have derived from that study.

Although Cunningham's sermons, taken together, failed to give a full-orbed presentation of the doctrines of Scripture and, in effect, reduced the doctrines of the Reformation, they did convey much of what was central to Reformed theology. In addition to reviving the battle cries of the Reformation—"sola fide," "sola gratia," and "sola Scriptura"—Cunningham frequently referenced the doctrines settled on by the Synod of Dort and the Westminster Assembly. Further, while at the Middle Parish Church in Greenock, he based a lengthy series of Sunday-afternoon lectures on the Shorter Catechism. Cunningham's brief period of popularity as a preacher while in Greenock was due mainly to his ability and willingness to preach these doctrines in

the face of the perceived threat to Westminster Calvinism known as the “Row heresy.” Greeted by a congregation confused and even divided over the “Rowite” doctrines, Cunningham wasted little time in transforming the Middle Parish Church into a vocal center of opposition to the new doctrines and the men who promoted them. As a young man, not long out of the Divinity hall and already bent toward controversy, Cunningham was well suited for the task. Exuding the kind of arrogance that comes from both the over-confidence of youth and newly-acquired knowledge, and motivated by the probable combination of opportunism and zeal for truth, he never hesitated to address in his sermons and lectures what he considered to be their dangerous heresies. Against Campbell’s doctrine of universal atonement and pardon through the death of Christ, for instance, Cunningham preached the doctrine of a limited atonement, arguing, consistent with the Westminster divines, that the payment of Christ’s death was limited to “as many as were ordained to eternal life.”⁷ Against Campbell the man, Cunningham revealed his less-than-collegial spirit towards those with whom he disagreed. By gathering evidence against Campbell’s preaching at the Floating Chapel in Greenock harbor, Cunningham showed his determination to see Campbell deposed. There was no attempt by Cunningham beforehand to meet with his fellow minister in private to try to bring him around. This was not an atypical response by Cunningham, who consistently demonstrated more concern for his view of truth than for the feelings of his opponents. When leaving Church one Sunday years later, he remarked to his good friend, John Bonar, “with the compression of lips which was peculiar to him when inclined to be severe: ‘We made short work with John Campbell for setting forth the love of God too loosely; perhaps we might do

⁷ Cunningham, *Sermons*, 320.

worse than turn our attention to those who preach the wrath of God as all His goodwill to men.”⁸ Not long after Cunningham listened to Campbell preach at the Floating Chapel, Campbell returned the favor by attending the Middle Parish Church, seating himself conspicuously in front of the pulpit. Cunningham completely changed his sermon, directing every word against Campbell’s views.

Called to the Middle Parish Church to heal a troubled congregation, Cunningham, partly through his confrontational approach, succeeded in doing far more. To a congregation confused about what they believed, he brought confidence in the doctrines of the Reformation; to a congregation in danger of dividing, he brought the kind of popular appeal that filled the pulpit and gallery stairs and required the construction of additional seats in every available space. In that context, Cunningham emerged as a popular defender of Westminster Calvinism.

Cunningham enjoyed significant influence as a preacher, however, only in Greenock. That same level of success was not reached at Trinity College Church in Edinburgh. Reasons for this were several. First, though his sermons were clear, logical, and filled with doctrinal exposition, they were uneven and often not particularly noteworthy. Horatius Bonar, writing privately to his brother John after the publication of Cunningham’s sermons, expressed what many must have thought.

I have seen your Preface to C’s Sermons with great interest & sympathy. ... I confess I cannot get myself up to your estimate of Cunningham’s sermons. Some are admirable, some are tame, some are dry—very dry. ... Some of your epithets I wd [sic] have toned down a little....⁹

⁸ Bonar, ed., *Sermons*, by W. Cunningham, preface, xxvi.

⁹ H. Bonar to J. Bonar, 19 March 1872 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 300-301).

Cunningham's sermons evidenced neither eloquence nor imagination. While the popular preachers in Edinburgh generously illustrated their sermons, Cunningham, wrote one observer, "stuck to the statement of facts, and shut his eyes and ears against all analogies and illustrations which a vivid fancy would have conjured."¹⁰ This matter-of-fact manner of presentation may have been appreciated amid the Rowite controversy in Greenock, but it was out of step with the cultivated congregations of the "Modern Athenians" in Edinburgh.

Second, Cunningham failed to exhibit the enthusiasm in his role as preacher that he did in that of public speaker. At times he could seem less than earnest in his prayers and reading of Scripture before the sermon. John Smith, author of *Our Scottish Clergy*, after hearing Cunningham lead two services of worship, described him as "going through his introductory services as if he had been asleep."¹¹ Cunningham's lackluster preaching while in Edinburgh, moreover, has been attributed to the practice of reading his sermons. The evidence, however, does not support this conclusion. Cunningham had, in fact, already begun reading his sermons while still in Greenock. More significantly, Cunningham read his classroom lectures, yet with as much "fiery power" as in his public speeches.¹² In truth, Cunningham's lack of zeal in the pulpit probably stemmed from lost confidence in his ability to be a popular preacher and in his increasing interest (and involvement) in the ecclesiastical affairs during the "Ten Years Conflict."

¹⁰ J. Smith, *Our Scottish Clergy: Fifty-Two Sketches, Biographical, Theological, & Critical* (Edinburgh, 1851), 77.

¹¹ Smith, *Our Scottish Clergy*, 79-80.

¹² MacGregor, "Dr. William Cunningham," 766-7.

II

As Churchman, Cunningham contributed significantly to the events leading up to the Disruption and then helped to establish the Free Church of Scotland as a denomination deeply entrenched in Reformed theology. His appetite for controversy, whetted by the library affair of his Divinity Hall days and enlarged by his conflict with the “Rowites” in Greenock, found abundant opportunity for satisfaction with his move to Edinburgh in 1834. Only twenty-eight and often impertinent, Cunningham was uncompromising in his idealism and unequivocal in his determination to confront all opponents. Confrontation had served him well, introducing him to the inner circle of the Evangelical party during his Divinity Hall days, bringing him notoriety while ministering in Greenock, where he gained experience in the Church courts, and probably contributing to his translation to an Edinburgh parish. Bolstered by these events and by the increasing awareness of his significant abilities in this arena, Cunningham was ready for the events of the “Ten Years’ Conflict.”

The Voluntaries were the first to face Cunningham’s invective. His clear articulation of the Reformation doctrine of the “two kingdoms” theory during the Voluntary controversy was both brilliant and harsh. His brilliance helped galvanize the Church of Scotland against Voluntary denunciations of the Establishment principle as it recalled their Reformation heritage; his harshness helped ensure the further tearing apart of friendships and missionary and philanthropic societies once comprised of both Churchmen and dissenters.

Although Cunningham opposed the Voluntaries in numerous ways—helping, for instance, to found the *Church of Scotland Magazine* and the Edinburgh Young Men’s Association for Promoting the Interests of the Church of Scotland—it was his

harshness that gained recognition for Cunningham and provided a platform to display his understanding of historical theology, especially that of the Reformation. In a lecture on 7 November 1834, at St Andrews Church, Edinburgh, for example, Cunningham defended the right of establishment against Voluntary efforts to disestablish the Church of Scotland. Referring to first and second generation Scottish Reformation leaders, John Knox, Andrew Melville, Alexander Henderson, George Gillespie, and Samuel Rutherford, as supporters of the establishment principle, Cunningham argued for a Reformed view of the relationship between Church and State like that of the Second Book of Discipline. Church and State, both societies instituted by God, are, Cunningham argued, two different provinces of his kingdom with the same overarching reason for existence—the promotion of God’s glory. The primary purpose of the Church is the “salvation of souls” and that of the State the “welfare of the community,” but each should cooperate with the other, exercising reciprocal independence to promote the glory of God. Although Cunningham presented a very able defense, he at times used less-than-defensible terms to describe his opponents. His statement that “the friends of the Church...had determined to stem the tide of atheism, infidelity, popery, and Voluntaryism, and to resist attacks made upon them by an apostate and perjured Secession” provoked such a storm of criticism from the Secession Churches that Cunningham promised to prove his allegations.¹³ Six articles, penned by his hand, for the *Church of Scotland Magazine*, were devoted to this task. Full of historical detail, these articles revealed Cunningham’s abilities as a historical theologian, enhancing his esteem within the Church of Scotland. They

¹³ Cunningham, “Union of Voluntaries with Papists and Infidels,” *Church of Scotland Magazine*, ii (August 1835), 262.

may not have convinced the Secession Churches but they provided the Establishment with ammunition against its Voluntary opponents.

Cunningham also blamed the Moderates in the Church of Scotland for contributing to the Voluntary attacks, charging the Moderates with Erastianism:

The Moderate party in the Church of Scotland, whose ruinous policy gave to Voluntary arguments all their plausibility, and to Voluntary efforts all their influence,...seem to think that the magistrate's obligation to promote the interests of religion and the welfare of the church, brings these subjects within the sphere of his jurisdiction, and entitles him to exercise authority over others in regulating them.¹⁴

Many of Cunningham's efforts during the years 1834 to 1843 were, in fact, devoted to opposing Moderate beliefs and practices as he sought to return the Church of Scotland to its Reformation foundation. And, at times, Cunningham was willing to rely on threats and political action to gain that end. Concluding his speech in support of the veto at the General Assembly of 1833, for instance, Cunningham warned the Moderates that:

This right cannot be much longer withheld, and it would be well if this house would learn from what is passing around them. Last year we came to this house asking merely for a committee to investigate the subject, but this was refused; we have come up this year in far greater numbers, and making a much larger demand; and if you refuse this, I trust that many will come up next year, who may ask still more, and ask it in a way which will compel you to grant it.¹⁵

After the Evangelicals lost that vote, Cunningham wrote an article for the *Presbyterian Review* entitled, "Hints towards the Formation of the next General Assembly," which appeared in January 1834. In the article, Cunningham divided the elders into two categories—"wrong men," or Moderates, and "right men," or

¹⁴ Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, 224.

¹⁵ "Ecclesiastical Intelligence," *Edinburgh Christian Instructor*, xxxii (June 1833), 303.

Evangelicals.¹⁶ The article then went on to encourage Evangelicals to “manage” the election of “right” elders for the next Assembly.

Much of Cunningham’s influence during the “Ten Years Conflict” was due to his resolute stand on significant issues before the Church. Once convinced of a position, he was immovable, often to the chagrin of colleagues and friends. Patronage was one such issue. When, early in 1834, he concluded that the veto was an insufficient measure, Cunningham began a clamorous campaign to abolish patronage. By 1837, he had become an acknowledged leader of the anti-patronage movement. When he began his campaign, most Evangelicals were content with the veto, and many in his own presbytery found themselves annoyed and offended when he added his voice to arguments there for the abolition of patronage. Their response was no doubt due in part to Cunningham’s publicly brash manner. Referring, for instance, to his fellow presbyters who were unwilling to stand for abolition as “cowardly & chicken hearted Evangelicals” did little to endear himself to them.¹⁷ And yet, it was this resolute, and sometimes tactless manner, combined with logical argument and a comprehensive grasp of historical detail, that enabled Cunningham to emerge to leadership in the Church of Scotland. His pamphlet of 1840, *The Defence of the Rights of the Christian People*, issued in defense of the Veto Act of 1834, argued, with imposing erudition, that no pastor should be forced on a congregation against its wishes. Cunningham ardently believed in popular election and cited a multitude of witnesses from the early Church up to the eighteenth century in support. It has been noted that this “pamphlet probably changed the Ten Years’ Conflict from a movement for the control of

¹⁶ Donald Withrington has noted that this practice probably began in the *Church Patronage Reporter* in September 1832 and was repeated by others before Cunningham.

¹⁷ H. Bonar to J. Bonar, 1 May 1834 (NLS, MS 15997, fols. 158-9).

patronage into a struggle for its abolition.”¹⁸ Cunningham helped to revive the “two kingdoms” theory of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, persuading many to seek uncompromisingly the spiritual independence of the Church. It was his most important theological contribution during the conflict.

Cunningham’s resolute posture affected the outcome of the Ten Years’ Conflict in other important ways. After the Court of Session, in March 1838, denied the legality of the Church’s Veto Act, there were two junctures at which the move toward Disruption could have been halted. Both times, Cunningham, whose influence was then nearly equal to that of Chalmers, opposed the measures and ensured the inevitability of the Disruption. In the first instance, Cunningham persuaded Chalmers not to submit to the Auchterarder decision by the House of Lords, a decision which in effect overturned the Veto Act and subordinated the Church courts to the civil government. That decision alone probably guaranteed the Disruption, but the Court of Session, in subsequent findings, expanded its attempt to reduce the Church to a department of the State. When the Evangelical Non-intrusionists then sought successive parliamentary solutions to the impending collision between Church and State, Cunningham opposed each one. Upon reading Aberdeen’s bill, for instance, which replaced the popular veto with a presbyterial veto subject to review and revision by the civil courts, he determined to oppose it. Although many Evangelicals were willing to acquiesce in the proposition, Cunningham convinced many others, including Chalmers, to reject it. Aberdeen withdrew his bill. In truth, Cunningham had determined in 1838, after the Auchterarder decision, that a break with the State was necessary. By his own admission, one of his great contributions to the events that

¹⁸ Macleod, “William Cunningham,” *DSCHT*, 229-30.

led to the Disruption was his opposition to compromise. Since the time of the Auchterarder decision, Cunningham stated, “I have always felt that we needed, not so much wisdom to decide what ought to be done, as courage and faithfulness in doing it.”¹⁹

Many—like Alexander Dunlop, Thomas Guthrie, and Hugh Miller—had played a significant part in the events leading to the Disruption, but it was generally recognized that Chalmers, Candlish, and Cunningham were the key players. The legal mind of Dunlop, the winsome imagination of Guthrie, the journalistic endeavors of Miller, the charisma of Chalmers, and the political adroitness of Candlish all contributed to the climactic event of the Ten Years’ Conflict. But without Cunningham’s knowledge of the history of Christian thought and his unyielding determination not to compromise with the State, the Non-intrusionists may have been willing to accept the conditions of the Government in order to remain within the Established Church. As Church historian A.C. Cheyne has noted, the Disruption period “was an age of crusades and campaigns—not only the Voluntary Controversy and the Ten Years’ Conflict, but also Chartism and Owenite Radicalism and the Anti-Corn Law League as well, an age in which claims tended to be pitched at their highest, and the language of denunciation stretched to its limits.”²⁰ In many ways, Cunningham epitomized this attitude, unwilling generally to conciliate or concede anything, and he convinced many of the Evangelical Non-intrusionists that compromise with the State would have eternal repercussions.

One of Cunningham’s greatest achievements during the early years of the Free Church was his success in holding the fledgling denomination together—by building

¹⁹ *Proceedings of the Free Church*, 1843, 61.

²⁰ A.C. Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 117.

consensus on potentially divisive issues and by silencing opposition. Cunningham had pinned his professional career to the success of the Free Church. But more important was his sense of the importance of the mission of the Free Church in conjunction with the other evangelical churches of Great Britain and the United States:

Britain and the United States contain nearly all the true religion that is to be found in the world. They are the only countries to which we can look at present for any vigorous or extensive efforts for promoting the cause of Christ, and advancing the welfare of the human race. ... On the Churches of these two countries depends, humanly speaking, the destiny of the world....²¹

Of the denominations in Britain, Cunningham held, the Free Church was the most consistently Reformed and evangelical. Much was at stake; much depended on avoiding any disunity within its ranks. Church history, however, is replete with examples of the occurrence of schism within denominations formed as a result of a split from another body. The Free Church faced that possibility during its earliest days, with the onslaught of the “Send Back the Money Campaign.”

The potential was there from the outset of the campaign for a collision between the two men who many assumed were prime contenders in succeeding Chalmers—Cunningham and Candlish. They had, it will be recalled, adopted opposite stances with respect to American Churches with slaveholding members—Cunningham urging quiet on the subject, and Candlish drawing attention to it, threatening to withdraw fellowship from those Churches in America that continued to “tolerate slavery by admitting slaveholders to their communion.”²² Cunningham, who was concerned to maintain relationships with the evangelical Churches in America and to keep the issue

²¹ Cunningham, “The United States of America,” 173.

²² *Witness*, 30 March 1844.

of slavery from dividing the Free Church, worked both privately and publicly to keep his denomination from taking action against the American Churches with slaveholding members. First, he persuaded Candlish to recommend to the General Assembly of 1844 the appointment of a committee to address the issue of slavery; Cunningham was to act as advisor. This the Assembly did, effectively killing any action it might otherwise have taken against the American Churches. Second, during the years in which the campaign was waged, Cunningham provided a theological justification for the Free Church to keep the money. As with the justification for slavery provided by Southern Presbyterians in America, this did much to sooth troubled consciences and preserve the unity of the Free Church. In the end, after several years of potentially divisive controversy, the Free Church suffered only minor damage.

Cunningham also took a leading role in uniting the nascent Free Church around a “determined heart-hatred” for the system of Roman Catholicism as he sought to hinder the advance in Great Britain of what he called “Satan’s great scheme for frustrating the leading objects of the Christian revelation.”²³ During a time in which the British Government was increasingly endeavoring to be fair to Roman Catholicism, as the faith of a large proportion of the population of the United Kingdom, anti-Catholicism was a sentiment around which members and ministers of the Free Church, as Protestants, could readily unite. Cunningham made it even easier to do so. This he did through publications, public speeches, and classroom lectures. His particular contributions in this area were several. First, unlike many Protestants of his day, Cunningham respected the sophistication of Catholic doctrine and devoted

²³ Cunningham, *Discussions on Church Principles*, 23.

tremendous energy to understanding and cataloging for the public the points of difference between Catholic and Protestant theology. One of his reasons for doing this was to convince Protestants that Roman Catholicism had not changed from the time of the Reformation. At a time when Cunningham believed that Roman Catholics were portraying their religion in a manner more acceptable to Protestants than warranted, he directed attention to the official teachings of the Roman Church and in the process helped to reignite the fires of the Reformation.

Second, Cunningham portrayed Catholicism as flawed not only in its parts but also in the whole. He characterized Catholicism as a degeneration from Christianity, as was Pharisaism from Judaism and Paganism from the Patriarchal religion of the Old Testament. This served to make Catholicism historically irretrievable from its downward spiral. The system itself, Cunningham believed, was not only ruined but also ruinous to its adherents, fostering humanity's natural tendency to self-righteousness. If that were not enough, Cunningham offered a third and ultimate objection—Catholicism was nothing less than the “Man of Sin” and therefore destined for apocalyptic ruin. Scripture, he believed, gave assurance that Catholicism would not change and therefore had to be destroyed. While other Churches might be reformed, the Roman Church was not to be reformed but extinguished at the return of Christ. This was an argument that precluded discussion and made it difficult to separate hatred for a system from hatred for those within that system. It was also an argument that reflected a harsher view of Catholicism than that of Chalmers, who in his contribution to *Essays on Christian Reunion* in 1845 had looked beyond the union of evangelicals and spoken wistfully of possible union even with Rome and

Orthodoxy.²⁴ Cunningham's espousal of a more rigorous anti-Catholicism may have done little to check legislative concessions to Roman Catholics, but it did much to feed popular anti-Catholic sentiment in Scotland and in the Free Church as he rallied them around the Protestant principle of giving no positive support to the "Man of Sin."

III

As Professor, Cunningham presented his students at New College with a polemical summary of the history of Christian thought, championing a conservative Reformed theology. This was especially true of his lectures in Ecclesiastical History, but also the case in his first lectures as Junior Professor of Theology. These lectures, which dealt with natural theology, evidences of Christianity, the canon, and inspiration of Scripture, were published by his surviving students nearly twenty years after Cunningham's death. The occasion of their publication in 1878 was the controversy over the critical views of Scripture advocated by William Robertson Smith, Professor of Hebrew at the Free Church College in Aberdeen. In that context, writes John Macleod, Cunningham's students "wished the Church and the world to know how such a master in the field of theological training dealt with the type of questions that were now thrust upon them for solution."²⁵ Cunningham's apologetic for the conservative doctrine of scriptural authority was largely a commentary on the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which deals with, among other things, the inspiration of Scripture. So thorough was his presentation that A.C.

²⁴ Rouse, "Voluntary Movements and the Changing Ecumenical Climate," 319. Rouse cites *Essays on Christian Union* (London and Edinburgh, 1845), 17.

²⁵ Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 264.

Cheyne has written that Cunningham's lectures "probably constitute the ablest—certainly the most learned and subtle—exposition of traditional views by any Scottish theologian in modern times."²⁶ In May 1881 Smith was deposed from his chair on the grounds that one of his articles in *Britannica* contained "statements which are fitted to throw grave doubt on the historical truth and divine inspiration of several books of Scripture...."²⁷ Although many factors were at work in Smith's dismissal, Cunningham's traditional exposition of the divine authority and infallibility of Scripture reminded the Free Church of her Reformed heritage at a time when that view was being challenged by a higher criticism emerging mainly from German scholars, "some of whom," Cunningham had written, "have brought to this work a large amount of learning, accompanied generally with a miserable lack of common sense and sound logic."²⁸

The series of lectures with which Cunningham's name is most closely associated was given to his students in Church History and published in 1862 as *Historical Theology*. As the title implies, the lectures dealt more with the history of Christian thought than the history of the Church, and were more thematic than chronological. This reflected something of a departure from the practice in the theological halls of Scotland at the time of Cunningham's appointment. Typically, according to Rainy, "the history of the Church [was rehearsed] in successive lectures, very much as it might be narrated in a tolerably full compendium,—the professor dwelling in more detail on topics which happened to interest him, and adding such reflections as the

²⁶ Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History*, 129-30.

²⁷ N.M. de S. Cameron, "William Robertson Smith," *DSCHT*, 783.

²⁸ Cunningham, *Theological Lectures*, 422.

insight he possessed enabled him to make.”²⁹ This was apparently the practice of Cunningham’s predecessor, David Welsh, assuming his *Elements of Church History* is an indication of his class lectures. Welsh’s work, according to Cunningham,

contains only a view of what is commonly called the external history of the Church till the time of Constantine. It is therefore almost entirely historical, and does not, from the nature of the subjects treated of, afford much scope for the exercise of the functions, and the manifestation of the qualifications, of the theologian.³⁰

Referring specifically to the teaching of the history of doctrine or historical theology, Rainy described three distinct approaches practiced during Cunningham’s day. First, it may simply answer the question, “What was believed and maintained during given periods of the Church’s history?”³¹ Examples include G. Bull’s *Defence of the Nicene Faith* and German compendiums of the history of dogma, such as *Textbook of the History of Christian Doctrine* by K.R. Hagenbach. A second approach, represented by works like F.C. Baur’s *History of the Doctrine of the Trinity* and J.A. Dorner’s *History of the Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, focused on contextual influences on the development of doctrines in history. This methodology sought “to explain the nature of each theological tendency, the soil it grew in, and the fruit it bore,—to trace the forces, intellectual and moral, which formed and guided each theological school,—and to shew how the various influences, inherent in the theology, or working on it from without, explain the course of speculation, or of controversy.”³² Finally, there was the approach followed by Cunningham, “different,

²⁹ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 226.

³⁰ Cunningham, “Welsh’s *Church History*,” *The North British Review*, iii (August 1845), 446.

³¹ Rainy, *Cunningham*, 227.

³² *ibid.*, 228.

wrote Rainy, “from that adopted, as far as I know, in any work that exists.”³³ “It refuses,” he argued,

to be contented with the bare reporting of the first method; but it also refuses to linger, like the second, over speculations as to causes and consequences. It presses on at once to the practical and ultimate question in which the theologian is interested, viz., What is true?...everything falls away excepting this question, applied to each great discussion, What was truly in debate?...and what was it all worth when summed up and sifted?³⁴

Of necessity, then, the “charm of historic detail was...sacrificed; the cross lights from human nature and human experience faded away...”³⁵

Cunningham, it will be recalled, had acknowledged at the beginning of his tenure as Professor of Church History that imagination was not his strong suit, arguing that this deficiency was actually a positive feature in a historian. And though he later became more receptive to considering the possible influences of contextual situations, his historical methodology would have benefited from a closer consideration of the genetic development of doctrines in history. Without this aspect of study, his conclusions could at times be somewhat naïve, not recognizing the personal and cultural biases affecting even the most deliberate theologians in the history of the Church. Unwilling to wrestle with the subjectivity inherent within the discipline of historical theology, Cunningham, did not always succeed in answering the question, “What is true?” There were occasions on which he merely propagated the theology of the men he admired or of the system he held.

In his address at the ceremonial opening of New College in 1850, Cunningham suggested that, consistent with his treatment of the course, his department might more

³³ *ibid.*, 230.

³⁴ *ibid.*, 228-9.

³⁵ *ibid.*, 229.

properly be designated Historical and Polemical Theology than Church History, something to be distinguished from, and supplementary to, Systematic Theology. “Never again,” writes A.C. Cheyne, “was the subsidiary—and frankly theological—role of Ecclesiastical History stated with such assurance and precision.”³⁶

In truth, *Historical Theology* approaches in its content a work of systematic theology. Cunningham used the major controversies of the Church, which he viewed as commentaries on the Word of God, as springboards from which to explore the main themes in Christian dogmatics.³⁷ As theologian Donald Macleod has written, Cunningham provides the student, through these lectures, with training in theological method as he “states the issue, summarizes the views of the various parties, indicates the evidence for the orthodox position and finally deals with the objections.”³⁸ Cunningham represented “the last phase of the Calvinistic tradition in Scotland,” and his methodology has largely been discarded today.³⁹ The work makes sense, in fact, only in light of his Reformation historiography, the foundation of which was the objective ground of the scriptural canon. The goal of Church History was to ascertain the meaning of Scripture:

The two most important questions that can call forth men’s interest, or exercise their faculties, are these: first, Has God given to men a supernatural revelation of His will? and secondly, If so, what is the substance of the information which this revelation conveys to us? All other subjects of investigation are subordinate to these.⁴⁰

As Church historian Joel Beeke has noted, Cunningham “believed that church history

³⁶ Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History*, 277.

³⁷ Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, i, preface.

³⁸ Macleod, “William Cunningham,” *DSCHT*, 229.

³⁹ D. Maclean, *Aspects of Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1927), 145.

⁴⁰ Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, i, 4.

was essentially the hammering out of dogma in the fires of ecclesiastical controversy....”⁴¹ Cunningham used these controversies to assess subjective development of Christian thought, enabling a pronouncement of true or false—that is, consistent or inconsistent with the Scriptures.

I mean, therefore, to attempt to survey the most important discussions on doctrinal subjects which have taken place in the church since God’s full and completed revelation was bestowed upon it, for the purpose of making use of the materials which this survey may afford in aiding to ascertain where the truth, the scriptural truth, in the leading controversies which have been carried on really lay; and to discover how the truth upon the particular subject may be most accurately stated, and most successfully defended, and how the opposite error may be most conclusively and effectively refuted.⁴²

Sectarian in his approach, Cunningham believed that the ancient and medieval periods of the Church were marked primarily by growing corruption. He therefore relied mainly on the controversies of the Reformation. The value of that period, he wrote, was the “restoration...of the doctrine, worship, and government of the church to a large measure at least of apostolic purity.”⁴³ For this reason, Cunningham devoted nearly two-thirds of his lectures on Church History to the formulations of Christian doctrine during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The “Fathers and the Schoolmen are mere children,” Cunningham wrote, “compared with the Reformers and with the great Protestant divines of the seventeenth century.”⁴⁴

⁴¹ Beeke, “William Cunningham,” *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, 222.

⁴² Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, i, 6.

⁴³ *ibid.*, 6-8, 461.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 7. Cunningham did, however, acknowledge in the introduction to *Historical Theology* that, “The first four centuries after the apostolic age...are invested with no small measure of interest and importance with respect to the history of theology, as well as in other respects; the second and third centuries exhibiting the church in what was indeed, in some respects, its purest state, but exhibiting also the seeds, at least, of almost all the errors and corruptions which afterwards so extensively prevailed; and the fourth and fifth exhibiting a far larger amount of talents and learning among the doctors of the church than ever before, or for many centuries afterwards, she possessed,—applied, too, in defence of some important scriptural truths; but, at the same time, with a growing measure of error, which soon spread darkness over the church,—a darkness dispelled only by the light of the

Cunningham believed that the seventeenth-century theologians clarified and in effect carried out the theology of the Reformation to its completion, substantially anticipating future discussions on important points. In the writings of these Reformed scholastics, he wrote, the discussion of major Biblical doctrines “is practically exhausted and conclusively determined.”⁴⁵ For the most part, doctrinal developments after the seventeenth century were dismissed by Cunningham as unwanted novelties. Indeed, Cunningham could even regard post-seventeenth-century innovations in Reformed systematics as disloyal to Reformed theology.⁴⁶

Although Cunningham was convinced of the contributions of the seventeenth-century divines, he valued Calvin far more than any other single theologian. Men like H. Witsius, P. van Mastricht, and especially F. Turretine supplemented Calvin where his thought was defective on minor points, but Cunningham felt that Calvin gave to the Church a comprehensive view and a balanced proportioning of biblical truths. Cunningham’s *Historical Theology* stressed theological proportion. “Taking his cue from Calvin,” writes Donald Macleod,

Reformation.” *ibid.*, 8. Having said this, however, Cunningham went on to dismiss the authority of the Apostolic Fathers and the Ante-Nicene Fathers with respect to “the interpretation of particular passages of Scripture, or in the exposition of the scheme of divine truth.” *ibid.*, 172. See also *ibid.*, 94-120 and 134-71 for his discussion on the individual Fathers and writings attributed to their pens. The one bright spot during this era, in Cunningham’s mind, was Cyprian who became Bishop of Carthage about the middle of the third century. “Cyprian is,” Cunningham wrote, “altogether one of the finest characters we meet with in the history of the early church; and his letters may still be read with profit, both by private Christians prosecuting the work of sanctification in their own souls, and by ministers of the gospel desiring to cherish the spirit in which their arduous and often very difficult and trying work ought to be carried on. ... Cyprian seems to have taken his views of divine truth somewhat more purely and simply from the Scriptures than many of the early writers; to have had less tendency than many of them to mix up scriptural truth with philosophical speculations, or to invent mere fancies of his own without any scriptural warrant; and to have had somewhat more of at least the spirit of the gospel.” *ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁵ Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 412

⁴⁶ Beeke, “William Cunningham,” *Historians of the Christian Tradition*, 220.

Cunningham insisted that there was a hierarchy among Christian truths: “there is a great difference, in point of intrinsic importance, among the many truths of different kinds taught us in Scripture”. As a result, doughty Calvinist though he was, Cunningham repeatedly warned against giving the distinctives of Calvinism a prominence unwarranted by Scripture.⁴⁷

Controversy provided the subject matter for Cunningham’s lectures; it also influenced the manner in which he taught his subject. “Even in the quiet of a college class-room,” one of his students wrote, “his lectures, regarded simply as a spectacle of battles—the battles of system against system—were what no student can ever forget.”⁴⁸ Cunningham was greatly loved and respected by most of his students. Although there were students who disliked the rigor of his logical presentation, given without eloquence or imagination, the great majority of Cunningham’s students were greatly impressed by his magisterial command of the history of Reformation thought, his zealous defense of those truths, and his sincere concern for his students’ welfare. As Professor, Cunningham won most of his students over to Reformed theology, stamping on their impressionable minds a thoroughly developed seventeenth-century scholastic Calvinism.

While serving as Professor at New College, Cunningham’s influence extended beyond the classroom walls. A series of carefully prepared lectures, first delivered to his Church History class, was published in the *British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, which he edited between 1855 and 1860. Published as ten separate articles, these essays defended the thought and character of the leading Reformers, while at the same time criticizing them on points at which Cunningham believed they departed from Scripture. The Word of God was the ultimate standard; the Reformers were judged accordingly. Nevertheless, for the most part, the theology of the Reformers

⁴⁷ Macleod, “William Cunningham,” *DSCHT*, 229.

⁴⁸ MacGregor, “Dr. William Cunningham,” 772.

was consistent with the Bible.

We believe that the theology of the Reformation, in its great leading features, both as it respects doctrine in the more limited sense of the word, and as it respects the organization of the church as a society, is the unchangeable truth of God revealed in His word, which individuals and churches are bound to profess and to act upon.⁴⁹

In these articles, Cunningham's intense loyalty to the Reformers is plainly evident. Any perceived assault on the relevance of their theology was met in these pages by a mature and nuanced, though sometimes exceedingly harsh, defense of Calvinism. The sternness with which he condemned other writers was evident in his comment on a statement by Sir William Hamilton: "We hope to prove that this elaborate statement contains about as large an amount of inaccuracy as could well have been crammed into the space which it occupies; and, if we succeed in doing this, we may surely expect that Sir William's authority upon theological subjects will henceforth stand at least as low as zero."⁵⁰ In spite of Cunningham's severity, he was then the foremost living authority on Reformed theology in the Free Church (and probably in Scotland). His arguments were accepted as given and were in fact highly successful in defending the character and beliefs of the Reformers. With respect to his article defending Luther, "It was said in the Edinburgh of that day that Dr. Cunningham had simply killed Luther's assailant."⁵¹

Cunningham thus demonstrated a theology firmly rooted in seventeenth-century Reformed orthodoxy. Nevertheless, three factors helped to prevent his theology from being labeled as hyper-Calvinism. First, he was not absolutely tied to that theology.

⁴⁹ Cunningham, *The Reformers*, 9.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 112-3.

⁵¹ A. Whyte, *Former Principals of the New College, Edinburgh* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1909), 21.

Like Calvin, Cunningham was unwilling to go beyond the limits of Scripture on doctrinal formulation. In his article for the *Review* entitled, “Calvinism and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity,” Cunningham criticized the scholastic intertwining of theology and philosophy. Second, in his article entitled, “Calvin and Beza,” Cunningham demonstrated that Beza’s theology and that of the Reformed confessions of the seventeenth century were substantially in line with Calvin’s thought, even though they represented further developments of Calvin’s theology. Third, his evangelicalism gave him an appreciation for non-Reformed Christians who were yet evangelicals. In an article that Cunningham contributed to the *North British Review*, for instance, he wrote that the founders of Methodism “were honoured by God to be the great instruments of the revival of true religion in England in the eighteenth century.”⁵² “Of course,” he continued, “we believe that the extraordinary success of Wesley and his followers was vouchsafed to them, not because of their Arminianism, but in spite of it....”⁵³

IV

As Principal of New College, Cunningham felt the weight of succeeding Chalmers. Nothing was more important to him at this juncture than fulfilling Chalmers’s dream for New College as a theological hall. It was to be a bastion of Reformed truth and old-style Protestantism, surrounded by an expansive Roman Catholicism and the incipient higher critical approach to biblical scholarship. To this end, New College would need to rival the best-equipped theological halls in the English-speaking world, with a demanding theological curriculum and a full

⁵² Cunningham, “Wesley and Methodism,” *North British Review*, xvi (February 1852), 507.

⁵³ *ibid.*, 519.

complement of Professors. Cunningham wanted the Free Church to devote her resources for theological education to one college that could be steadily improved. With the onset of the College controversy, however, he feared that his dream might fade.

In addition to his sense of duty to New College, Cunningham's own academic ambitions were at stake, and he made the battle against proposals to establish additional Free Church colleges a personal one. It became the most divisive event of the Free Church's first two decades. From the start, Cunningham seemed to have no intention of recognizing any merits in his opponents' arguments. He was fixated on the business of enhancing the one college. Sadly, Cunningham held to his one-college position as fiercely as he held his doctrinal positions, unwilling even to remain friends with those who opposed him. In the end, though Cunningham lost his battle for one college, he did receive from the General Assembly of 1855 the commitment to complete the curriculum by establishing five theological professors at New College.

Cunningham's vision for New College was more circumscribed than that of Chalmers. During Cunningham's fourteen years as Principal, the college narrowed its mission from one of building a free university to the more modest one of forming a theological seminary. Cunningham lacked the enthusiasm of his predecessor for a university and as a hint of things to come, in his inaugural address as Principal, he referred to New College as a theological institute. Further, under Cunningham's leadership, the theology of New College became more conservative and Calvinistic. As A.C. Cheyne notes, "Theological criticism and innovation were at a discount."⁵⁴

⁵⁴ Cheyne, *Studies in Scottish Church History*, 25.

Among the Professors of New College, Cheyne adds, "it is Cunningham who more than any of them embodies the fiercely conservative, combatively orthodox, high Calvinism in its earliest phase."⁵⁵

Through his roles as Principal and Professor, Cunningham largely determined the character and theological ethos of New College until his death in 1861. Under his leadership, New College was also firmly established and housed in a majestic new building sited prominently on the Mound. The completion of the curriculum provided students with a comprehensive theological education.⁵⁶ And Cunningham's restless quest to continue the perfecting of New College contributed greatly to what became recognized as the most important Reformed seminary in Europe in the middle part of the nineteenth century. Through New College, Cunningham's imprint on the Church extended beyond the borders of Scotland as his students found their way to "almost every nation in Christendom" and to "every quarter of the globe."⁵⁷

V

Cunningham died at the age of fifty six, having exhausted himself in years of tireless service as preacher, Churchman, Professor, and Principal. In each of those positions, he had quite deliberately embroiled himself in controversy. His intellectual constitution fitted him well for life as a controversialist, but the personal strain he experienced may well have contributed to his early death. From the library affair in his Divinity Hall days to the debate over the number of theological colleges during his Free Church years, Cunningham never spent a whole year without a major

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 292.

⁵⁶ Brown, "The Disruption and the Dream," *Disruption to Diversity*, 49.

⁵⁷ MacGregor, "Dr. William Cunningham," 784.

controversy. Immediately after his student days, he faced the Rowites in Greenock; during the Ten Years' Conflict, he contended first with Voluntaries and then with Moderates and an encroaching Government; after the Disruption, he battled abolitionists, Free Church ministers, and ministers of Scottish denominations that identified with the principles of the "Send Back the Money Campaign;" afterwards, he warred with some of his closest friends and colleagues in the "College Controversy;" and throughout his career, Cunningham fought Roman Catholics. Only in the last five years of his life did he enjoy a respite from the strenuous demands of heated debate.

As a controversialist, Cunningham had few equals, either in the Church or in Parliament. His extraordinary power in debate was both a blessing and a curse—a blessing because it enabled him to rise to a place of prominence within the Church and to exercise extensive influence; a curse because his abuse of that ability obscures for many his important accomplishments. Cunningham could at times be highly confrontational with opponents. But there are several mitigating factors that must be considered in an assessment of his overall character. First, he believed the controversies in which he engaged to be of great consequence, affecting, for example, the credibility of the fledgling Free Church of Scotland and her ability to promote and defend the principles of Reformed, evangelical Protestantism against an increasingly confident Roman Catholicism and an increasingly liberal Continental influence. Believing that Great Britain and America were the only major nations with a significant Christian witness only increased in Cunningham's mind the importance of Free Church efforts to frustrate any form of Christianity not consistent with the principles of the Reformation. Also at stake for Cunningham was the nature of the Church, especially with respect to her relationship with the State, and the nature and

proclamation of the gospel. These were matters of eternal consequence.

Second, in modern psychological parlance, Cunningham would probably be labeled a perfectionist. He had many tendencies that lend credence to that characterization. In his relationship with the United Secession minister, John Brown, for example, Cunningham allowed disagreement over the Apocrypha controversy to sour a once close relationship. "Intimacy with him after that," Cunningham wrote, "was out of the question, because it was impossible for me any longer to respect him."⁵⁸ Cunningham evidently found it difficult to appreciate the overall balance of a man's character if he perceived the existence of a single significant defect. Principle sometimes took precedence over people for Cunningham. He so strongly felt the consequences of wrong belief that he could treat adversaries harshly in order to win in debate. Cunningham also drove himself extremely hard and seemed to be surprised that others did not do the same. This was especially evident in debate when he castigated his opponents for what he considered to be lazy, irrelevant argumentation.

Third, Cunningham recognized that his propensity to deal severely in debate was not only wrong, but also detrimental to the cause of religion. He was frequently disappointed over his inability to change, and he often went out of his way to apologize, often to his own humiliation. His apology to John Brown at the founding meeting of the Evangelical Alliance is one such example. And in his later years, Cunningham did finally soften to some degree. John Duncan, his colleague at New College, witnessed Cunningham's closing address as Moderator at the General Assembly of 1859. "Very admirable," he remarked; "all his strength, but finely

⁵⁸ *Edinburgh Advertiser*, 28 November 1837. Cunningham, however, later changed his mind, it will be recalled, and sought to restore the relationship between himself and Brown. In a similar situation, his friendship with Candlish was also restored after a time of estrangement.

mellowed; *Hercules still, but he has no club!*"⁵⁹

Fourth, in spite of Cunningham's intimidating public persona, he was gentle and warm-hearted in person. Young couples who went to see him to discuss their weddings and students who met with him after class in his office were all relieved to find him gracious and personable in private conversation. This aspect of Cunningham's personality is generally accepted and has not been challenged. Even *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, no friend of the Free Church or of Cunningham, conceded this point when addressing Cunningham's appointment as Principal of New College.

He was in private humble, modest, manly, and kind. He reserved his rudeness for the stormy public arena of debate; but in private the native genialities of his heart found ready expression and kindly play. He had the qualities that create friends, and secure their attachment; and this feeling of personal regard and kindness operated greatly to promote his election.⁶⁰

Cunningham fought hard throughout his professional life to revive the doctrines of the Reformation. Perhaps his greatest contributions in that endeavor were his efforts toward the building of the Free Church of Scotland. For nearly two decades, Cunningham stamped his brand of Reformed orthodoxy on candidates training for pastoral ministry. His death, however, "marked the end of the first phase of the history of New College."⁶¹ Commitment to Reformed orthodoxy quickly lessened with the appointment of younger liberal scholars like A.B. Davidson and W.G. Blaikie, who introduced New College to new perspectives. Nevertheless, through

⁵⁹D. Brown, *Life of the Late John Duncan, LL.D.*, 2nd edn rev. (Edinburgh, 1872), 397.

⁶⁰"Comments on the Assemblies," *Macphail's Edinburgh Ecclesiastical Journal*, lxxix (August 1852),

6.

⁶¹S.J. Brown, "The Disruption and the Dream," *Disruption to Diversity*, 49.

Cunningham's published works, recently reprinted by publishers such as The Banner of Truth Trust and Still Waters Revival Books, his influence continues, especially among those loyal to the theology of the Westminster Confession of Faith. Through his books, Cunningham's lectures still give students the impression of a "learned theologian" who "had no difficulty...in admitting and affirming the peculiar doctrines of Calvinism, obnoxious as they are to many cultivated minds, simply because he believed that the Bible is the word of God, and was assured that these doctrines can be proved by the sure warrant of Scriptures."⁶²

⁶² Macleod, *Scottish Theology*, 268; "The Late Principal Cunningham," *The British and Foreign Evangelical Review*, 209.

APPENDIX

Campbell's peculiar doctrines are difficult to comprehend, partly because he gave new meanings to commonly understood biblical terms and partly because his theology was in a state of flux as he sought theological answers to a pastoral problem. Even Eugene Bewkes's eulogistic account of Campbell's theology, *Legacy of a Christian Mind*, acknowledges that Campbell was "struggling" in his theological development at this time.¹ The key, however, to understanding his soteriology begins with his belief that God loves all people (without exception) and demonstrates this love in the life and death of Christ, the representative of each and every person.² Because Christ is the representative of all, the atonement is for all, reconciling God to man, but not man to God.³ In other words, the atonement places all people in a state of grace or pardon, removing the judicial barrier which guilt interposes between the sinner and God, thereby giving everyone a right and title to come to Christ.⁴ This universal pardon (not universal salvation) is intended to lead people to be reconciled to God.⁵ In order for this reconciliation to occur, the individual must believe that God has pardoned him or her, and the only way to come to this conclusion is to believe that God has pardoned all through the atonement of Christ.⁶ This in fact is the gospel, that Christ has died for all and therefore for you.⁷ Being assured of this is equated with repentance and reconciles the individual to God. (This is why assurance is of the essence of faith and necessary for salvation.)⁸ In truly believing this gospel, a person

¹E.G. Bewkes, *Legacy of a Christian Mind* (Philadelphia: The Judson Press, 1937), 40.

²*Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, xix; *ibid.*, 43, 74, 90, 106-7; Campbell, *Notes of Sermons*, i (Paisley, 1831), 5.

³Jenkins, *Atonement*, 7, footnote 10; *Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 56.

⁴*ibid.*, 32-5; Jenkins, *Atonement*, 253, 263-4; *Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 24, 57-8.

⁵*ibid.*, 37-8.

⁶"Many said, 'Believe that Christ died for you, and your faith will be an evidence to yourself that you are one of those for whom Christ died:' he said, 'Believe that Christ died for you because He died for all mankind.'" Campbell, *Reminiscences*, 27.

⁷*Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 5-6, 41-2, 45-6, 52, 134-5.

⁸Campbell distinguished between assurance of faith and assurance of salvation. The former is

receives Christ as Savior, through the ministry of the Holy Spirit, who works faith in us and thereby unites us to Christ. Only the elect will believe the gospel and be united to Christ, and therefore only the elect will escape the wrath to come. Those who are not elect, who refuse to respond to the universal pardon of God by being reconciled to God, will be ultimately judged on this refusal (rather than on the basis of breaking God's law) and be placed in the lake of fire.⁹

This understanding of Campbell's view of union with Christ differs strikingly from that of a prevalent contemporary interpretation, which is most clearly expressed by M. Jenkins. He wrote that there "is only one union with Christ, for Campbell, Christ's union with humanity in the incarnation."¹⁰ In other words, Campbell "understood our union with Christ to be that which Christ did in uniting himself with all humanity in the incarnation, and not an event in the individual's religious experience."¹¹ Campbell, however, believed that union with Christ *was* an event in the individual's religious experience. "*In as far as the work of God in Christ is a thing exterior to a man,*" Campbell stated, "and not a part of the history of his own soul, that *to that extent* the thing is universal as respects the children of men."¹² There are people, he argued, outside this union (all non-Christians) who because they stand outside of this relationship with Christ are condemned by God.¹³ Further, only through the personal exercise of faith does Christ enter into union with a person.¹⁴ When Campbell spoke of Christ being given to all people, he did not mean that Christ was in everyone (or

the assurance of God's love towards someone that placed that person in a state of pardon, an assurance which can only be derived from believing that God has placed all in a state of pardon. The latter is the assurance that someone has come to believe in the former, thereby becoming a child of God and therefore "in a condition of looking peacefully and contentedly along the tide of coming events, and anticipating eternity, and committing it to God in the assured confidence that his eternal state shall be a blessed one in the enjoyment of God." *Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 58-60.

⁹*Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 43-4; *ibid.*, 38; *ibid.*, 37-8, 190, 229; Campbell, *Sermons and Lectures*, ii, 228-9; Jenkins, *Atonement*, 278-9.

¹⁰Jenkins, *Atonement*, 7, footnote 10.

¹¹*ibid.*; see also 9; footnote 12, 280f.

¹²*Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 50.

¹³Campbell, *Notes of Sermons*, i (Paisley, 1831), 14; Campbell, *Sermons and Lectures*, ii, 228.

¹⁴Campbell, *Notes of Sermons*, i, 24-26; Campbell, *Sermons and Lectures*, ii, 110-111.

that everyone was in Christ), but that Christ had been given by God to die for all people.¹⁵ This merely gave everyone “a right to share in this his nature;” to take advantage of this right, we must by faith “receive God in our nature....”¹⁶

¹⁵ *Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 43-4.

¹⁶ Campbell, *Notes of Sermons*, i, 26; Campbell, *Sermons and Lectures*, i, 111; *Proceedings of the General Assembly*, 1831, 36, 50.

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